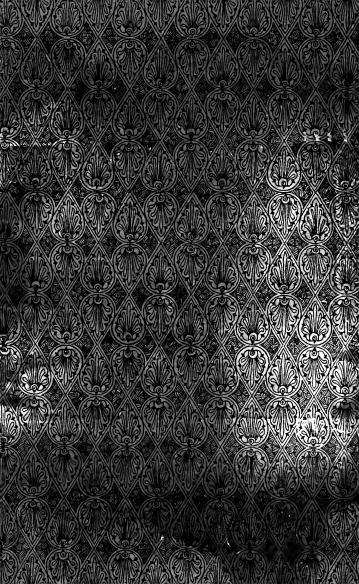
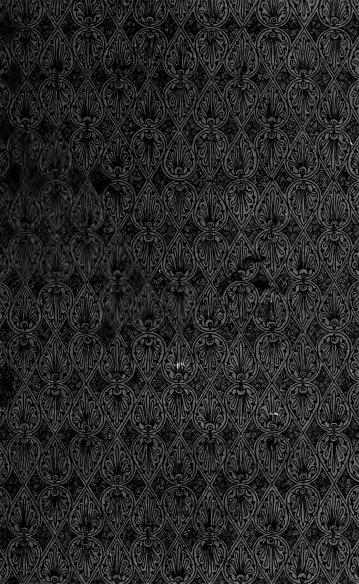


MITRE COURT MRS. RIDDELL







MITRE COURT.

A Tale of the Great City.

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MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF "GEORGE GEITH OF FEN COURT," "SUSAN DRUMMOND," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES. VOL. III.



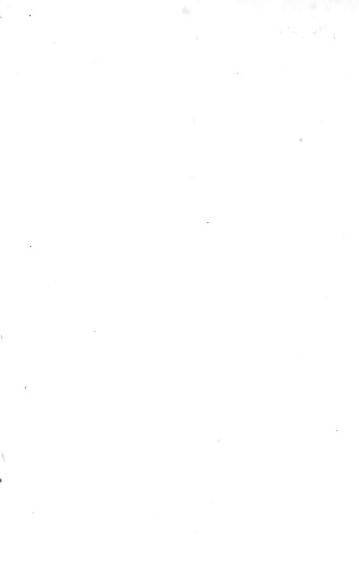
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MITRE COURT.

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CHAPTER I.

MR. KATZEN PROPOSES.

Katzen had taken the defaulting stockbroker's desirable residence drew to a close, great pressure was brought to bear on New Andalusia's Consul, with the object of inducing him to buy the appropriate furniture and fag-end of the lease.

"Come, Mr. Katzen, you shall have it for a song," remarked the trustee.

"Very well," said the Consul, "what song shall it be? I do not sing, but that is a mere detail."

Then the accountant, feeling sure of his vol. III. 41

man, named what he called a merely nominal sum, whereupon Mr. Katzen, with well-feigned surprise, exclaimed:

"I see! I see! It is a cheque you want, not a song. Now why could you not have told me so at first?"

He was not such a foolish bird as to be caught with chaff. "No, no, no," he declared; "I am tired of your villa. The Thames sometimes comes up to the hall door. Think how pleasant it must be to step from the windows into water! You take back your house, and sell it if you can. If you can't, why it will have to stay unsold, so far as I am concerned."

"But a man in your position ought to have a house, Mr. Katzen. Reflect—consider the very very low price we have put upon it. You will never meet with such a chance again."

"That may be. I shall run the risk. What one does not want is dear almost for nothing. Besides, I mean to have a house—in London, though—a flat."

"You will want furniture, then. Why not make a bid for the contents of Maple Villa?" suggested the trustee eagerly.

"What!—to put in my flat? My good sir, you must indeed consider me a very silly person."

If anyone thought so, it certainly was not the astute individual addressed. Indeed, about that time, Mr. Katzen's cleverness was a theme of frequent conversation amongst even those who had not the happiness of intimate acquaintanceship.

As usual, rumour exaggerated his success in floating the New Andalusian loan, and piloting it to land.

"Knowing little beggar!"—"Hatful of brains!"—"Not another man could have done it!"—"He's like a cat: once he gets his head through any hole, he can squeeze his whole body!"—"There's no ladder too tall for the fellow to swarm up!"—"Deep dog!"—"Wise enough to keep his own counsel!"—"Shouldn't be a bit surprised to see him at the top of the tree in another year or two!" Such were a few of the encomiums passed on the Consul by those who but a short time previously had pretended not to see him in the street, and were

wont to speak of him as a "needy little adventurer."

Other times, other manners. Mr. Katzen was in the sunshine now, and the motes were dancing about him.

The loan had long been closed, for the good reason that no more money was to be cajoled out of John Bull's capacious pockets, and Mr. Katzen was now pursuing various new speculations of his own. No one could have found fault with him for want of decision in his New Andalusian monetary campaign.

When he found the returns failed to pay the cost of advertising, he instantly stopped the game.

"That well is pumped dry," he decided. "We must sink another." He had found the festivities at Maple Villa extremely useful as landing-nets for desirable fishes, and it was for this reason he determined to take that flat for which his friend the accountant had wanted him to purchase Mr. Perham's chairs and tables.

"Yes," thought the Consul, "the time has come when I must make a change. Fowkes' Buildings was well enough, but Karl Katzen is not precisely the Karl Katzen who once was glad to rest there. He is a power now, and should be lodged accordingly."

He said nothing to Mrs. Jeffley of his intention till his new abode was ready for occupation. Nay, even then he waited a little, keeping his rooms in her house on for a time, though he rarely occupied them.

At last he told his good friend that, even while he was broken-hearted at the idea of leaving, he must go.

For a moment Mrs. Jeffley looked at him incredulously; then crying, "I knew it—I felt this was coming," she burst into tears.

With what words Mr. Katzen soothed, or rather tried to soothe, the fair Maria, he never afterwards could exactly remember. Mrs. Jeffley took not the smallest notice of his assurances of devotion.

Things had lately been going contrary with her. One person had left in her debt. Captain Hassell was about to be married. Her term of the house was nearly out, and the landlord would not enter into a fresh agreement, except at an increased rental. Jack had grown of late rather independent,

and when his wife began to scold he took his hat. Servants were more difficult than ever to procure, and when procured could not be induced to stay. Miss Weir told her that while she kept Mrs. Childs about the house she need not expect to get a servant to remain in it. Her cup had seemed full before, and now Mr. Katzen added the last drop which caused it to overflow.

"But it is no matter what I feel," she said. "I am nobody—you have got so rich and so grand, the old days are quite forgotten."

"When I forget all you have done for me, may Heaven forget me too," answered Mr. Katzen; "and as for the little money I have made—when your fine ship comes home, you will have money too."

And so he chatted on, till Mrs. Jeffley dried her eyes, and remarked with a heavy sigh:

"Fretting would not set a broken bone, and she must make the best of it. You will be marrying next, I suppose," she went on.

"I dare say," he answered. "All in good time."

[&]quot;Abigail Weir, of course."

"Perhaps she may not have me."

"Oh, she'll have you fast enough now," said Mrs. Jeffley, with an emphasis which meant the only friend who had liked him, and stood to him in his days of adversity, was the one he coolly proposed leaving.

"I hope you will prove a true prophet," returned Mr. Katzen, with great presence of

mind.

"I only wish I was as sure of getting my lease renewed as I am she won't say No when you ask her," answered Mrs. Jeffley. "It was only this morning she told me she had got to hate the sight of a needle, and wished she could find any other way of earning her bread."

"What a rare faculty you have, dear friend, of putting things pleasantly!" remarked Mr. Katzen.

"Well, you know, it is hardly to be expected a young girl would marry a man old enough to be her father *for love*."

"Very true; but that signifies not at all—the love will come."

"I am sure I hope it may—some people would not like to chance it, though."

- "Some people are afraid of chancing anything."
- "Remember, I have nothing to say against Abigail Weir—all the same, I think you would have done better to choose a woman nearer your own age, and that had not been picked out of the gutter. People are apt to cast up things like that."
- "They are indeed," said Mr. Katzen, with ready acquiescence.
- "And you might feel it hard to be told some day your wife had been a beggar child —no less, no more."
 - "That is true—I might."
- "And so you will think twice before throwing yourself away?"
- "I will many times, dear friend. Thank you so very much."
- "Not, remember, but I think the girl a good girl."
- "That is the best of you—always just, always generous."
- "I would do my endeavour to act fair by everybody."
- "And your endeavour is your act—beyond all things you are free from the few foibles of

your sex. You know not envy or jealousy, or any such bad passion. It is not many ladies standing in the glorious summer prime of life who can look with clear, ungrudging eyes on the tender little maidens still innocently straying under the apple-blossoms of spring. But you, ah! you are angelic! For you the sere autumn holds no terrors—for you the approach of that inevitable winter which changes beyond recognition even the most beautiful, cannot affright."

And feeling he could not civilly add anything in the way of nastiness to this flowery speech, Mr. Katzen, intimating that he intended going for a little stroll, left Mrs. Jeffley to meditate if she pleased on the mutability of all friendship, more especially male friendship.

"He's off to that girl," thought Jack's wife—"well, I'm sure I don't know! What he can see about her passes my comprehension."

Mr. Katzen, however, was not off to "that girl;" instead, he meant to see Mr. Brisco.

"No time like time present," he considered, when time present means money at your bankers, credit everywhere—a good position, and the reputation of being as shrewd a man as any on Change. And you are shrewd, my Karl—only—only—it does seem hard that when you were just as clever and capable—as persevering and as ready to seize a chance as you are now—you could not get a soul to believe in you except perhaps poor stupid Mrs. Jeffley, and our good friend in Love Lane. Never mind, though. What a world this is, my faith! Kick it hard—harder—and it will lick your hand—grovel to lick it. Speak it fair—pat it—pouf!—how it snarls—how it has snarled at you!"

Even when contrasted with his present prosperity, the memory of that time of adversity was not quite pleasant. The consciousness that we have conquered fate often fails to salve the wounds received during the fight; and though he showed so brave a front and sneered with such scorn at the folks who had flouted him, often that part of a man which in such a nature as Mr. Katzen's apes self-respect turned sick to think of what his other part had borne in the struggle for mere existence—for bare meat

and clothing—lodging, and a shilling or so in his pocket to keep the devil out.

"Let it go—let it sleep," he murmured; "it was a black past—we won't spoil the sunshine by thinking of it;" and he turned his face resolutely towards the old house, where in answer to his knock he was cheered by the sight of Abigail.

"How are you?" he cried. "It is so long—so long—"

"What is so long?" asked the obdurate maiden, releasing her hand.

"Since we have met," returned Mr. Katzen tenderly.

"Oh! is that all? Surely it was not worth while calling to say so little."

"Ah! but I have more, much more to say," he answered; "and that reminds me—is Mr. Brisco to be seen?"

"I suppose so. He is in his room;" and with this plain dismissal Abigail walked back to her own snuggery, leaving Mr. Katzen to make his way upstairs, helped to do so by the faint gleam of a gas-burner turned as low as was compatible with being alight at all.

Abigail never glanced at her lover, but he

stood on the first landing making pantomimic gestures of love and admiration till her last footfall died away. Then, with a serious face, he set himself to the task of bearding Mr. Brisco in his den.

"And I can't even hazard a conjecture as to how he will take it," thought the Consul. "However, here goes!" and he rapped lightly at the accustomed door.

There was a pause, during which Mr. Katzen's quick ear caught the sound of a faint rustle of paper, of a drawer being cautiously closed, and then utter silence.

"Soh—h—h!" whispered the Consul to himself; after which comforting exclamation he tapped again.

"Who is there?" asked Mr. Brisco.

"I-Katzen-Karl Katzen-"

"Oh! Mr. Katzen," said Mr. Brisco, opening the door, "pray walk in. I did not expect to see you."

"I hope I am not a very bad sight," returned the Consul.

"Bad! Quite the contrary. Won't you sit down? And how are you?"

"As well," said Mr. Katzen, accepting the

proffered chair, which lacked a back, "as a man can be who comes a-begging."

"A-begging!" repeated Mr. Brisco. "What can you want to beg?"

"Not money," was the reply. "No, not so much as a single brass farthing; but I do want something badly."

"What is it?" And Mr. Brisco's tone was not encouraging.

"First," said the Consul, no way abashed or disconcerted, checking off one item on the fore-finger of his left hand, "your patience——"

- "And then?"
- "Your attention."
- "Yes, and afterwards?"
- "Your wisdom, judgment, common-sense."
- "Do you want my advice?"

"No. I take no man's advice. Rude, you say, but true. You take no man's advice. Why should you? Why should I? Why should anybody not a fool?"

Mr. Brisco shook his head. "If you are propounding some conundrum," he observed, "I may tell you I never even tried to guess one in my life."

"It is not a conundrum, this want of mine. Listen to me. I am doing well—you know that. It is a miracle what fortune has come to me. Sometimes I stand still, and say I to my own self, 'Can it possibly be all since Whitsuntide last year?' Everything has so changed. Now, big people stop me in the street, and say, 'My dear Katzen.' And I hear and smile, and think, 'Not so long ago I was cheap Katzen, useless Katzen—so little you could not see me across Finch Lane.' Ah! bah! and all the time I am just the same, the same heart, the same brains, the same bones, the same body."

Mr. Brisco smiled bitterly. "It is easier to see a sovereign than a halfpenny, you remember."

"True, true. I am the gold now. I was but the poor copper once. Never mind that, though. See me as I am, prosperous, well considered, going to do bigger things still, and yet I want—a small trifle more."

[&]quot;And that is—"

[&]quot;Can you not guess?"

[&]quot;I cannot guess—unless you want more money."

- "I shall be able to get more money; it is not that."
 - "Then, in God's name, what is it?"
- "When a man has money, a house, furniture, what is it he most generally needs?"
- "I have not the faintest idea. You must tell me. I give it up!"
 - 'Why, a wife, to be sure!"
- "A wife!" echoed Mr. Brisco in amazement. "Good Lord! Whose wife?"
- "Whose wife! Nobody's wife," answered Mr. Katzen. "I want a wife of my own."
- "Then why don't you get one? Women are not so scarce."
 - "Ah! It is just there I need your help."
- "My help!" said Mr. Brisco. "My good sir, are you mad?"
- "I am not mad," answered Mr. Katzen.
 "I want a wife—not a vague wife, but a particular wife, and you are the only person who can aid in perfecting my happiness."
- "What do you take me for?" asked Mr. Brisco. "A bishop, or an archbishop, or even a curate?"
 - "No. I shall not require a parson till

later on. What I require now is a good word from you to the lady."

"To what end? I don't know who she is; and if I did----"

"Oh yes, you do know her," interrupted Mr. Katzen.

"You must be mistaken. I do not know a woman even to speak to, except Abigail——"

"That is enough. It is on Abigail I have set my heart. It is with Abigail I want your help."

"Abigail!" repeated Mr. Brisco. "Abigail Weir!"

"Are you aware of any obstacle?" asked Mr. Katzen a little uneasily. But Mr. Brisco never answered him. With his hands folded before him on the table, he sat silent, looking steadily into vacancy.

For a time Mr. Katzen sat silent too, but at last he broke the stillness by suggesting:

"You seem surprised—"

Mr. Brisco turned his pale face and cold eyes full on the Consul as he said:

"I am stunned."

"What! did you never suspect anything of the sort?" "Why should that have made me suspect you?"

Mr. Katzen shrugged his shoulders.

- "None so blind," he thought. "Anyhow," he added aloud, "I never remember the time when I was not more than half in love with our wandering maiden. It has grown with her growth. I have desired money for her sake, influence that I might sway her, position that I might share it with her; I have served for her seven years. Give her to me!"
 - "She is not mine to give."
 - "Then she is not yours to withhold."
 - "True, she is not-"
 - "To whom does she belong?"
 - "I don't know that she belongs to anyone."
- "If that be so, there cannot be much difficulty. Come, Mr. Brisco, I have spoken frankly to you—why don't you speak frankly to me?"
 - "About what?"
- "About Abigail; I want to marry her. Have you any objection?"

[&]quot;Certainly not."

[&]quot;Strange, too. Not even when I suggested the possibility of her having a lover?"

Mr. Brisco resumed his rapt contemplation of the farther corner of the room.

"I had other views for her," he said, as though arguing the matter with himself.

Mr. Katzen longed to ask if those views included transforming the sprightly Abigail into Mrs. Brisco, but he refrained.

"Though as a lover," he began, "it behoves me to be modest, I confess, speaking as a disinterested outsider, I think that charming Miss Weir is not likely to get a much better offer."

"I dare say not—I dare say not," agreed Mr. Brisco, in an absent tone of voice.

"Then why won't you answer me?" asked Mr. Katzen. "Why do you neither give nor withhold your blessing? I do not ask or care who her father and mother were, or whether she ever had any; I do not seek to solve the mystery of her coming here and of your letting her stay; I am willing to make a small settlement to the end that, if left a widow, she should not be forced to go on stitch, stitch to the end of the chapter. I long for the delights of domestic life—long for the fireside, the easy slippers, the saucy

talk of Abigail. Give her to me. Speak a good word of recommendation—say, at least, you are not averse."

"You have taken me by surprise," answered Mr. Brisco coldly. "Such an idea never occurred to me—never would have occurred. Why, you must be five-and-twenty years older than she, at least."

"Hu—m—m—m!" exclaimed Mr. Katzen.

"There is a disparity, I admit——"

"I should think there is," interpolated Mr. Brisco.

"Still, it will lessen every day."

"Will it?"

"In proportion, I mean. She will grow older year by year."

"And you will grow younger, I suppose?"

"Most likely. Why not? Prosperity and happiness might well make a greybeard young. Besides, it is not a case of May and December—more like April and July, shall we say?"

"Say what you please; it won't commit us," observed Mr. Brisco.

"And you need not be afraid but that I

would be good to her. I would take her to see beautiful lands——"

"Yes; but, you see, I have not the faintest notion whether Abigail would care for travelling. Her journeys for many years past have been confined to the old house and the three surrounding parishes."

"Ah, you mock me!"

"I mock you! What is there to mock at? You have taken away my breath, I confess, yet still there is nothing really extraordinary or unnatural about what you say. Only I had not thought of Abigail leaving me, and——" He just stopped and hesitated for one moment, then added—"But, of course, it stands to reason she must go. Mr. Katzen, as you put it, I can have nothing to say against the match."

"Look here, Mr. Brisco," cried the Consul eagerly; "I have no desire to separate you and Abigail. Come and live with us; make our home yours; let Abigail remain your daughter; try to take me for a son."

There was a pause. Mr. Katzen could not see the old man. He held his hand so as to protect his eyes from the blinding glare of one poor dip. When he answered he did so in a sharp, bitter voice:

"Thank you; but I can't do that exactly. If she likes to take you, do not trouble yourselves about me. I did very well before she came; I have no doubt I shall do very well after she goes. But, after all," went on Mr. Brisco, "it is not I who can decide, only Abigail herself. I will call her."

"Surely you will speak to her first in private—tell her all I have said?"

"To what purpose? That she should think I was misrepresenting you, or that you should feel sure I had been influencing her? We will know what the person most interested has to say;" and he rose and moved to the door.

As he passed out Mr. Katzen could but notice a strange change in his gait—a change so marked that he felt half inclined to follow him. He swayed unsteadily, and for a moment caught hold of the lintel of the door as if to balance himself; then he walked on, and Mr. Katzen heard him descending the stairs.

"He can't drink," he thought; then added

next instant—"Does he drink? Faith, maybe that is the solution of the enigma, after all."

"Abigail," called Mr. Brisco from the first landing.

The word woke all the echoes of the old house; the girl's name seemed to be repeated again and again from basement to garret.

"Here I am—do you want me?" answered Abigail.

"Yes: come up to my room, if you please."

She came—following Mr. Brisco in. She was dressed in a dark blue dress of some soft material which fitted her perfectly; she had a tiny flower in her brooch; her collar was as usual snow-white; she wore an apron with pockets containing the eternal sewing implements; the damask was blanched out of her cheeks, and Mr. Katzen saw by the quick restless glance she cast around that for some reason she was ill at ease.

He had risen when she appeared, and offered her his chair—the room boasted but two. Persons who came to see Mr. Brisco rarely felt tempted to remain long.

With a slight gesture Abigail declined the Consul's courtesy. She stood looking at Mr.

Brisco, who had on his return at once, and without reference to what anybody else liked to do, resumed his seat. Mr. Katzen remained standing; he waited to hear how Mr. Brisco would open the proceedings. He was not long kept in suspense.

"Abigail," said her benefactor, with no unseemly levity, putting a question which struck the Consul as eminently absurd, "have you ever thought of marriage?"

The girl glanced at Mr. Katzen, and the cloud of anxiety disappeared from her face.

"I scarcely understand," she answered demurely.

"Mr. Brisco means, brightest one, have you ever thought that some day you may marry yourself?"

"Of course I have," she replied promptly; "not that I may marry myself, but that I will marry some other person."

"Ah! And who is that other person?"

"Mr. Katzen, if you remember, I always said you wanted to know too much."

"My question was addressed to you, Abigail," broke in Mr. Brisco, "and I must

beg you to give *me* your attention and return a serious answer."

- "I am quite serious," said the girl, and she looked so.
- "Then I may take it for granted you have thought of marriage?"
 - "Certainly—we all do."
- "Ah, the charming frankness—ah, the dear sex!" exclaimed Mr. Katzen.
- "If that be the case," returned Mr. Brisco, taking no notice of the remark, "I need not waste any time in preliminaries, but tell you at once, a gentleman has done you the honour of asking for your hand."
- "No honour," murmured Mr. Katzen; "quite the other way.

A smile flickered round Abigail's mouth, but the eyes she fixed on Mr. Brisco were quite grave and steady.

"I may say at once, I consider the offer in many, in most respects advantageous. The gentleman is well-to-do; he offers to make such provision as shall secure you—who have not a penny of fortune—a competency. He says further, he is much attached to you."

"He adores you," commented Mr. Katzen.

"Perhaps you had better finish the explanation yourself," suggested Mr. Brisco; "you appear to think my oratory tame."

"Who then is this gentleman?" asked Abigail, addressing Mr. Brisco with a delightful assumption of ignorance.

"Ask Mr. Katzen; he is better acquainted with him than I."

Thus bidden, Abigail turned towards New Andalusia's Consul.

"Who is this wonderful person, Mr. Katzen?" she asked.

"Why—I—I, my dearest; who but I, your Karl—most devoted, most faithful!"

She did not seem overwhelmed, and probably Mr. Brisco was a good deal more surprised by her self-possession than her most devoted, most faithful.

"But we settled all that long ago," she said.

"Settled, my darling? No—not by any means."

"Have you then spoken to Abigail on this subject before?" inquired Mr. Brisco.

- "Ach, yes—often!" said the girl, answering for him.
- "Only a little—in jest," explained Mr. Katzen, answering for himself.
- "I'do not think you were," observed Abigail; "at any rate, I was in earnest."
 - "Ah! be not so hard."
- "I am only speaking the truth. I have told you many times, nothing in the world could induce me to marry you; and I am glad, in Mr. Brisco's hearing, to be able to tell you the same thing again. I would not marry you if you were able to settle the whole of New Andalusia on me to-morrow—gold mines, coral reefs, and all the rest of it!"
- "I think, Abigail, that is scarcely the mode in which a proposal of marriage should be received and answered. I do not know much about such matters, but——"
- "If you can teach me any form of words, sir, that will persuade Mr. Katzen I am speaking in good faith, I shall be only too glad to adopt it," returned Miss Weir with great spirit.
 - "But recall our compact, dear Abigail.

When I had made a fortune—when I was Baron von Katzenstein—then you gave me leave again to prefer my suit. It has come, that I now have a little fortune, which I steadfastly purpose to make a great one—I can be Baron, if I will, ere long."

"I don't care!" interrupted Abigail; "all that signifies nothing to me. If you were Emperor of Germany I would not marry you—if you had the wealth of all the Rothschilds it would not tempt me. Mr. Brisco," she added, turning to that gentleman, "please make him understand I mean no. I don't mind having to work—I don't mind being poor—but I won't be asked over and over to marry a man I don't like—that I never did like—that I never shall like."

Having finished which exhaustive confession of faith, Abigail burst into angry tears and left the room.

"'Tis the young man round the corner," said Mr. Katzen, calmly reseating himself. "Dear friend, if you do not want a likely grocer, or long-haired organist, or consumptive poet smuggled unawares into the house as our Abigail's husband, you had better cast

all the weight of your influence into the scale of Karl Katzen, who is foolish enough to love your little waif, and wants to save her from herself."

And thus, the ice being broken, Abigail's unwelcome lover talked on for nearly an hour, Mr. Brisco saying very little—though, if his face were to be taken as an index of his state of mind, thinking a great deal.

At length the Consul took his departure.

"We are going to have rain, I think," he said, pausing on the threshold to make the remark, and then he went.

Mr. Brisco closed the door after him, shot the bolt, put up the chain, and was about to return to his own room, when, moved by some unaccountable impulse, he thought he would just look at Abigail. No sound broke the stillness of the old house, but after nightfall no sound was wont to disturb its silence.

For all that, he stood quiet for a moment and listened—scarcely a mouse was to be heard moving behind the wainscot. He had never felt the silence so oppressive before, not even in the days ere the child came to him, when he lived utterly alone, utterly desolate, in the mansion where men and women suffered and rejoiced, and children made merry, and honoured guests trod the marble hall.

Standing still on the broad landing for a minute, to Mr. Brisco's fancy the house seemed full—people coming, people going, trooping up the stairs, sweeping across to the great hall door and vanishing into the night—ghostlike—noiseless.

That the desolation of the place should seem all at once so oppressive struck him with a great surprise, yet there was nothing really strange about the fact. In the time long departed when he and his sorrow resided there alone together, he had his sorrow for company-and a man with a grief is like a man with his love: he resents anything which comes between him and the absorbing passion; but the years as they came and went had little by little dulled the sharpness of his grief. Though he fancied the features of his dead wife were clear and distinct as when he last saw her, it is quite possible that, had a miracle been performed-had he met her in the street-he would not quite

have recognised her. What earthly landscape ever looks the same to the eyes of middle life as it did to the sight of youth? The landscape does not change, but we do. We go on, and we do not quite remember.

Mr. Brisco did not quite remember the hard bitter features of that grief, the spell of which had been over him when he entered into possession of the house in Botolph Lane. The mists of time had risen between his sorrow and himself, and though he thought he saw it clearly as ever, the past at last had become mercifully blurred and dim—other objects, other hopes, other interests had grown as grass does over a grave, and while the dead past lay below, never to be totally forgotten, the rough clay and the upheaped clods were clothed with greenery, even if it were but the greenery of common weeds.

And for long he really had not been quite alone. As the very presence of a dog is society, so the child kept by him at arm's length—the girl he sometimes through the whole of a day scarcely spoke to—had been a presence to feel—a something mentally to touch. Dancing through the house, making

believe to herself that she was receiving company—waking the echoes with her voice, contriving, managing, working—always neat, always bright, always cheerful, always helpful, involuntarily, even, one must have missed such an inmate. Summer and winter, spring and autumn, the well-nigh silent but ever helpful companionship had lasted; and now it was slipping away, and the full knowledge of what that implied struck on his heart.

Mr. Katzen had said she would go—if the Consul did not take her, another was certain to do so. He had known this was true. But it had not seemed to him near or real, till a man able to keep a wife and make a settlement offered to marry her.

And then she refused determinedly, not to say rudely—much had evidently gone before—and if that had been going on without his knowledge, what else might not be going on even then!

How still the old house was—how desolate! He went back into the hall and along the narrow passage, and pushed open the door of their common living-room. The fire was almost out, the subdued light of the paraffin

lamp showed that Abigail was absent. Her work lay on the table just as she had put it down—her thimble, scissors and cotton were there also. Mr. Brisco looked around the apartment—there was a stillness that might be felt.

Lifting the lamp, he carried it across the hall and went into all the offices on the ground-floor—there was no Abigail anywhere. He passed upstairs and entered the offices on the first floor—darkness and silence reigned in each. On the landing he stood and thought. Every evening Abigail might have been absent in like manner for aught he knew of her movements, but still the fact that she was neither to be heard nor seen seemed a novelty he could not get over. Turning along another passage, he tapped at the door of her bed-chamber. "Abigail!" he said, "Abigail!" and still no Abigail answered.

He turned the handle and entered. Since she came to him a waif and a stray—since she lay in that illness, caused by starvation and terror and exposure, which followed her arrival in Botolph Lane—he had never once —even by accident—crossed that threshold before; and now it was with a sense of intrusion and almost wrong-doing he raised his lamp and looked around the young girl's room.

It was a closet rather than a room, the poorest, narrowest, meanest chamber in all the house, and yet she had made it homelike.

The little bed with snow-white coverlet; tiny dressing-table set out with a few ornaments that had been presents to her; pictures from the illustrated papers hanging in fancy frames of her own manufacture on the walls; her few dresses hung tidily in a narrow recess, and protected from dust by a curtain made out of some cheap print; a shelf on which her boots, old and new, were ranged; a few books placed on the chimney-piece; a pervading odour of dead rose-leaves and dried lavender—that was pretty nearly all—yet it affected Mr. Brisco strangely.

Since she was a very child, a poor forlorn, meagre atom, going about in makeshift clothes, none of which belonged to her save by gift, she had been an active, helpful presence in the house, giving much, asking

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little—and some day, soon perhaps, it might be she would leave it for ever.

At that very time where could she be? Once again Mr. Brisco glanced around the tiny room; then, lamp still in hand, he passed out, closing the door behind him.

There was but one place more he had a chance of finding her, for whatever the kitchens of Sir Christopher's house might have been in Sir Christopher's time, they could not in later days be deemed places to which anyone was likely of his own free-will to resort. Some of Mr. Brisco's tenants paid a moderate sum for the convenience of there keeping barrels, boxes, hampers, of all sorts, but Abigail no more affected the former bakehouse and larders than she did the cellar into which she had crept out of the piercing winter weather.

Still carrying the lamp, Mr. Brisco ascended the narrow staircase leading to the roof—the door was bolted on the inside; clearly therefore Abigail could not be taking a comprehensive view of the City by gaslight. As he stood at the top of the flight he heard rain dashing against the door and sweeping

over the leads—the wet night Mr. Katzen had prophesied was come. Slowly Mr. Brisco descended the steep flight of steps; when he reached the bottom, feeling sick and giddy, he placed the lamp on the stairs, and leaning against the wall, trembled violently.

What was it memory gave him back at that moment? Those nights when he had glided about the house like a sleep-walker, when the girl came and paced by his side and slipped her warm young hand into his and led him tenderly back to safety. Not singly, one by one, did they recur to his mind—he seemed to grasp them collectively: the stillness of the summer dawn and the bitter wind of March; the chill blast of autumn, and the biting cold of New Year's Eves, when the church bells were ringing, clamouring, pealing a joyous welcome to the fresh comer; and he—he was keeping his vigil with the dead.

And now these vigils had ceased altogether. Abigail's night watches were over; he even had forgotten them. How was it? Had the love grown weaker, the sorrow lighter; was he already old and dull? No, surely not that, when he had got something else to live

for. It was only, he said to himself, that another interest had so woven itself into his nature as to partially crush out the former grief.

"A man must have some object in life," he muttered, "and though *her* child deserted me, it was once all for him—all——"

And then he took up the lamp again with hands he could scarcely steady.

"I am not well," he thought; "something has pulled me down. I must try to get strength, or I shall not be able to enjoy my good fortune when it comes."

And so all alone in that great house he went carefully, step by step, into the hall. He replaced the lamp on the table, and then (an unwonted thing for him to do) he sat down in Abigail's chair and began idly to touch the thimble, cotton, and scissors, which had been her tools for so many a day.

His thoughts went back; he thought of his life before she came, his life since she had been with him. Certainly the girl was a wonder—her management, her thrift, the still, steady industry with which she managed a large house, and saw it kept clean and orderly

on the pittance Mr. Brisco allowed for that purpose. Still he did not like, he knew he had never liked her. The very cheerfulness which made sunshine in the old house proved in itself an affront to one so enveloped in gloom; but yet, sitting there in the utter silence, and reluctantly letting his heart tell truth (for the simple reason that he could not help himself), he confessed he could not spare her. If she deserted him, who was there to take her place? Bereft as he was of all legitimate ties, he had quite unconsciously dovetailed the girl into every future plan; just as persons when taking a new house, or remaining in an old, think of some capable servant in connection with necessary arrangements, so, without any feeling of tenderness or even thankfulness towards Abigail, Mr. Brisco decided it would be an evil day for him when she left Botolph Lane—a day on which all the projects over which he had been so long brooding would be disarranged, if not upset.

Well, she was not gone yet; she might not go. He had no wish to reconstruct his chosen future in order to find a place in it for Mr. Katzen. Nevertheless, it might be that he would have to do so.

At all events, better Mr. Katzen than any other likely suitor—better than any Englishman Abigail could hitherto have had a chance of captivating.

He would be bad enough, but not so bad as the grocer, or organist, or poet, hinted at. Meanwhile, where was Abigail?

Mr. Brisco made his way again into the hall, and paced the marble pavement till his limbs were weary and his feet chill.

"I will take down the chain," he thought at last, "and draw back the bolts—then she can let herself in; and to-morrow I will have an explanation with her; to-night I feel too tired and shaken."

Slowly, and with numbed and tremulous hands, he unfastened the door; he undid the catch and left the lock free. At the same moment Abigail's key shot back the wards, and she and Mr. Brisco stood face to face on the threshold.

"Where have you been?" he asked harshly.

The girl stepped in and closed the door.

- "At church."
- "What induced you to go to church?"
- "I remembered there was service at St. Margaret Pattens, and, as I did not know how long Mr. Katzen might remain here, I got out of the way till I imagined he must be gone."
- "You have not been at St. Margaret Pattens till this time of night?"
- "No, I went a little farther to get something for supper."
 - "Are you wet?"
 - "Scarcely at all."
 - "Yet it has been raining heavily."
- "Only for a short time. I was under shelter during the worst part of the shower."
- "I must talk to you to-morrow. I cannot have you running about the streets at these hours."

Abigail did not answer. She went upstairs, took off her hat and jacket, changed her shoes, bathed her face, smoothed her hair, washed her hands, and came down in five minutes ready to do the little that was needed.

Mr. Brisco had disappeared; so she set

out his supper on a small tray, which she carried to his room. Of her purchases she kept nothing back for herself; she had no heart to eat.

- "Is there anything more I can get you?" she asked.
- "Nothing, thank you," Mr. Brisco answered.
 - "Good-night, then," she said softly.
 - "Good-night."

According to custom, she fastened up the lower part of the house, and then, feeling heavy and exceeding sorrowful, went to bed.





CHAPTER II.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

HILE walking up Love Lane, Mr. Katzen determined he would ອີ not return immediately to Fowkes' Buildings. In his eyes the night was still young, and he thought a stroll through the City streets and lanes would at once compose his mind and stimulate his brain. He had seen many countries, and could discourse fluently concerning the grandeur and beauty and desirability of every land under heaven except Great Britain. To hear him talk, any person might have imagined he adored scenery, that his heart was on the Rhinehis native, his vine-clad-and yet he cared really for no spot on earth save that bounded on the north, east, south, and west by Throgmorton and Bishopsgate and King William and Princes Streets. One might have narrowed this space, but scarcely enlarged it.

"'Tis here the business of the world is done," he said, gazing with his mind's eye comprehensively at Lombard Street and Capel Court. "See the huge gambling-houses, where men of all nations play and are played for. How they lose, how they gain! how they cheat, and lie, and thieve! Monte Carlo is a fool in comparison."

Where a man's treasure is we know his heart will be also; and it was for this reason Mr. Katzen liked to roam round and about the Royal Exchange and picture the contrast between midnight and midday.

"I am so fond of reverie," he remarked once to Jack Jeffley.

"He is so fond of thinking how he can trick somebody, I suppose he means," observed Mr. Jeffley to Frank Scott, who in reply only shook his head. The days were gone when he was ready with a word of excuse for Mr. Katzen.

Pondering deeply upon the great measure

of success which had been vouchsafed, in no boastful or arrogant spirit, but thankfully, as a man who, after many disappointments, hauls a fine salmon to shore, Mr. Katzen strolled into Lombard Street, and made his way thence into Cornhill through one of the numerous courts which connect those thoroughfares.

"It gets cold," he thought, as he passed in front of the Royal Exchange, "and feels damp. I will return to the Jeffley mansion. Though it is not amusing, it may be warm. How happy could we all have been there! Strange! Mrs. Jeffley never asks Abigail to step round and spend an evening. Likes no woman near her, unless she is a sold as Deborah the prophetess, and uglier than Sycorax. A mistake; but it is never any good to tell a lady she mistakes—no, not even Abigail. Ah, here is that threatened rain!"

He hurried his pace, and, crossing Gracechurch Street, got into Leadenhall Market before the worst of the shower began to fall. The market was not looking its best business had nearly ended; the ground was dirty and strewed with all sorts of refuse; the few customers belonged to the lower orders. A mingled smell of live poultry and dead fish, of rabbits in hutches and decaying vegetables, of sodden straw and fresh fruit, rendered the place scarcely satisfactory to the nostrils of even a curious observer; and Mr. Katzen's curiosity had been exhausted long previously. He knew the swans, and the venison, and the plovers' eggs, the foolishly amiable-looking white brahmas and the pugnacious bantams—knew the dogs and the pigeons and the dealers as well as he knew the furniture in Fowkes' Buildings. So he made no stay in the market, but hurried on to Lime Street Passage.

There was no use trying to get into Lime Street. The rain was falling in torrents, so, being unprovided with an umbrella, he had to stay in comparative shelter, wedged in with a number of other persons. Mr. Katzen stood idly viewing the crowd and the rain. People were jostling each other, armed with dripping umbrellas, the sharp ribs of which were eternally getting into the Consul's face or playfully trying to force a way between his coat and backbone. It is not good fun

standing up out of the rain in London; but Mr. Katzen hated getting wet, with a detestation too deep for words.

Still the rain came down as if the windows of heaven were opened; then it slackened, then it began again, then it showed signs of moderating.

A few persons, turning up their coat-collars and poising their umbrellas desperately, went out into the dreary night. The press grew less. Mr. Katzen had space to stand in, though he was by no means solitary. Suddenly he felt his coat twitched, and, turning to discover who had done so, saw no one near him but a stunted girl dressed in a limp. black gown, a white apron, a small checked shawl, and an old straw bonnet which looked as if it had been slept in as well as sat upon. Her face was in shadow, and fixed steadfastly on Lime Street. Mr. Katzen concluded some one must have twitched his clothes accidentally, when he felt a second twitch. It was the girl. Still, never glancing up at him, with her left hand she kept pulling his coat-tails with a persistency which was exasperating.

"How dare you do that?" said Mr. Katzen. "Don't venture to touch me again."

"See them?" asked the girl, in a hoarse whisper.

Mr. Katzen knew that voice.

"Did you see them?" she repeated with a chuckle.

"What do you mean?" demanded the Consul; "see whom?"

"Why, Miss Abigail and her young man," exclaimed Mrs. Childs' Sophia.

Mr. Katzen made a step forward, then he found he did not know which way to follow.

"Where are they?" he inquired.

"You've missed them now," she answered.

"They were walking fast. She linked close up to him, and he a-holding the umbreller right over her. They are sweet — she *is* taken up with him!"

"And who is he?" asked Mr. Katzen, quivering with eagerness.

"Who is he? Why, the young man as is in the front office at Mr. Brisco's—who else? I mean the office where all those wild men are. Many's the sore day I had rubbing

them over with oil as hard as ever I could lay to my strength."

"What is his name—what is he called?"

"I misremember now, but you know him—he lodges at Mrs. Jeffley's, and Miss Abigail thinks there's not such another. I first saw them in Trinity Square, and I couldn't make out who she'd got hold of. Aunt would not believe me at first she'd found a beau to her mind—thought it was you. But lor', I knew better!"

The tone in which Miss Sophia said this suggested an implication so little flattering that Mr. Katzen refrained from asking her why she knew better.

"She's wholly wropped up in him," went on Mrs. Childs' niece. "I don't know why, because he's no such great things to look at; but she is. And it is not well for maids to be so fond and show it. Eyes on, hands off—that's what's best to say. That's what my aunt used to say to the men when she was young; that's what she bids me say if any fellow makes too free."

Mr. Katzen was not given to unseemly mirth—not given indeed to mirth at all as a

rule—but the vision of Sophia chastely repelling, with this formula, the advances of a too ardent lover, proved more than his gravity could stand. He broke into peal after peal of laughter—laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks, and the passers-by turned to see the cause of such extraordinary merriment.

"Here, child!" he said at last, slipping half-a-crown into the girl's hand; and then he walked down the passage, still laughing as he went.

"Well, you are a funny one!" remarked Sophia, with a mystified stare, while tightly clasping the coin he had given her.

She could understand that—it does not require much intellect to grasp the meaning of half-a-crown.

Meanwhile, Mr. Katzen pursued his way to Fowkes' Buildings, not much disconcerted. He had, within the last half-hour, gained a clue he much wanted. Of course, it was scarcely pleasant to know for certain Abigail really possessed a lover, but he had always suspected the fact; and now, by the help of

Sophia's hints, he would be able to find out who he was.

He was not aware of any new inmate added to Mrs. Jeffley's establishment, but fresh inmates were often being added without his immediate cognizance. One thing he determined. He would put no question on the subject to his "best friend;" neither would he go next day to Botolph Lane. Instead, he determined to post Mr. Brisco a note, asking him to call in Mitre Court. Having written and dropped this note into the nearest pillar-box, he passed softly upstairs, and succeeded in reaching his own rooms without meeting anyone.

Only waiting to smoke one cigar, he went to bed and to sleep, quite unconscious of what the next day was to produce.

He had not been in his office an hour, on the following morning, before Mr. Brisco appeared.

"I have come early," he said, "because I think I shall have to go out of town this afternoon—on—business."

"Indeed! And who, then, takes care of Miss Abigail?"

- "She will do very well," was the reply. "She always gets some one to stay with her when I am away."
 - "Still, it must be very lonely."
- "I do not think so—at least, I have never heard her complain of loneliness."
- "For a good reason, perhaps; possibly she is not lonely because not alone."
- "She will have Miss Greaves, or some other female friend. But you wanted to speak to me—at least, I gathered as much from your note."
- "True, I did—I do; I want to ask you something—not idly, you understand, but for a reason. Those wine-merchants, then, that have the front office—the beautiful dining-room—who are they?"
- "I do not know anything more than that they are wine-merchants; I have very little to do with them. They pay their rent and give no trouble. Why do you ask?"
 - "What are their names?"
 - "Linderfeld and Co."
- "That gives me not much information."
 - "Tell me what information you require."

- "Are they young men, or middle-aged, or old."
 - "Young; the eldest about eight-and-twenty, I should think."
- "And always at business, always on the spot, always to be seen?"
- "I can't say; I fancy not. Their manager is generally there to answer inquiries. He seems a very steady person."
 - "Ah, elderly?"
 - "No, not older than his principals."
- "What a juvenile sort of establishment! And how do you call him?"
 - "Scott."
 - "Scott! Did you say Scott?"
 - " Yes."
 - "Scott! What-Frank Scott?"
 - "Cannot say; I only know him as Scott."
 - "But it must be Frank Scott."
 - "It may be."
 - "Because he lodges at Mrs. Jeffley's."
 - "And if so, what then?"
- "Why, then a good deal. He is the young man round the corner—the young man on whom MissWeir has fixed her young affections."

- "Utterly impossible!"
- "Perfectly possible. They were out together last night—one heart, one soul, one umbrella."
 - "Did you see them?"
 - "No; but I heard they were out."
 - "From whom did you hear?"
- "From a friend of mine, who knows them both." Mr. Katzen really could not bring himself to say his informant was Sophia. "They have been seen together before now."
 - "I think you are mistaken."
- "Think what you please, Mr. Brisco. I have given you a hint; take it, or leave it, as you like best. If you approve the match, well and good; if you do not, it will be a match all the same. Matters have advanced so far, these young lovers are the talk of the parish."
- "How true it is that people must go from home to hear news," sighed Mr. Brisco.
- "It is of no use hearing news when people refuse to believe them," retorted Mr. Katzen sharply.
 - "Pardon me," said Mr. Brisco, "I do not

refuse to believe. I confess, however, it seems to me unlikely Abigail has conceived so violent an attachment to a young man she cannot have seen at all till close on Christmas last year, and most likely not very often since."

"Pish! That is all you know about it," returned Mr. Katzen. "He has been close at hand for years. But, however, it does not signify to me. I made you an honourable offer, as nearest friend or guardian, or whatever you choose to call yourself, to Miss Abigail Weir. If she and you prefer this youth, that is your affair. I am certainly not going to enter into competition with a fellow who comes from nobody knows where and belongs to nobody knows who. He had scarce a penny to bless himself with when he turned up at Jeffley's, and, if the husband had not taken a fancy to him, he'd often have been hungry enough. A poor, tamespirited sneak, with not enough manliness to strike out for fortune. Jeffley got him a trumpery situation in a bill-broker's office, and, I dare swear, recommended him to his present berth."

"Are you sure of what you say?"

"There you have chapter and verse, and you can let your adopted daughter and ward marry him if you like. I dare say it will suit his purpose excellently well to sit rent free in Botolph Lane with a wife able to work and make both ends meet where anybody else must starve. I would have placed her in a different position. But it is all a question of choice. Thank Heaven, she is nothing to me now. This has proved quite a disillusion." And having worked himself up into a white heat of rage, Mr. Katzen tore an old envelope into very small bits, which he threw into the fire.

"I do not think we shall do much good by discussing the matter further at present," remarked Mr. Brisco, rising.

"I do not think we can do any good by discussing it again at all," said Mr. Katzen.

"At any rate, do not condemn Abigail till you have heard her defence."

"It is not material to me whether I ever hear her defence," was the reply. "As she has chosen, so let her abide."

Mr. Brisco said nothing further; he only

sought the door. The Consul watched him out, and then remarked to himself with a grin:

"The sly little lady will have a fine time with the old man! I think I have trumped that trick of yours, Mr. Frank Scott. That was a very nice game indeed you were having all to yourself."

And then he too went out, not because he had anything very special to do, but rather for the reason that he felt hearing how "things were going" in the neighbourhood of Bartholomew Lane might brace him up a little.

"That business of my Abigail looks more ugly by daylight," he reflected. "Nevertheless, now I see the cards I ought to be able to win the game."

After he had lunched, by no means lightly, he took a more favourable view of the matter, and returning to Mitre Court mentally at peace with Abigail, at any rate, he was surprised to see proceeding up the staircase before him a portly female figure, arrayed in good and fashionable garments.

Ladies were articles not plentiful in Mitre

Court—articles, if the truth must be told, not wanted in Mitre Court. Not a man in the district ever desired to see a woman during business hours; certainly Mr. Katzen did not. If Diana herself had turned up Milk Street, he would have liked to give her in charge. Therefore the vision of this strange lady merely moved him to wonder where she could be going.

"To Bindel on the third floor, no doubt," he thought, Bindel being a poor devil certain to figure in the *Gazette* ere long—and then, even as he thought, the lady stopped at his own door and entered.

She was asking the clerk when he would return at the moment Mr. Katzen appeared. Hearing her voice, "Why, Mrs. Jeffley!" he exclaimed.

- "Yes," she said, a little fluttered.
- "Pray walk in," he entreated. "I followed you upstairs, and, would you believe it? failed to recognise you. Now sit down, do, and tell me how you like my new office."

She looked around with a far-away, uninterested glance.

"Mr. Katzen," she said, bringing her eyes

back to her lodger, "I have come to tell you something."

"Good," he added. "Good, I am sure!"

"You won't think it so; but I could not find it in my conscience to keep such a story from you."

"Your conscience must always be right, as you are—ever," replied Mr. Katzen. "Now, dear Mrs Jeffley, I consume myself with impatience. What is it?"

"I have a very shocking truth to tell you."

"Is that so? Ah! but still it would be best I should hear what that truth may be."

"Abigail Weir is a thief!"

Mr. Katzen was surprised, as well he might be. Who that had seen Mrs. Jeffley's face, and heard Mrs. Jeffley's tone, could have failed to be surprised; but he was not a man to show his discomfiture.

"None should know that better than I," he said. "The dear thief, she has stolen away this whole heart of mine."

"I am not talking about hearts," said Mrs. Jeffley, provoked. "What she took was far worse than hearts."

"But what could be worse?" asked Mr. Katzen.

This shot had certainly taken him unawares, and he was trying to gain time, in order that he might steady his senses. "What did the little baggage annex? A man's soul?"

"You are quite right in calling her a baggage. I could not have ever believed in such wickedness."

"After my experience, I can believe in any wickedness. That is no trouble to me—none at all. So, what has this sinful Abigail stolen?"

"A pound of sausages, a pork-pie, and some brawn!"

Mr. Katzen looked at Mrs. Jeffley as if he thought she had gone suddenly mad. Then he began to laugh.

"This is beautiful," he said.

"It is well you think so. She would have stolen more, had she got the chance."

"But, my dear madam, reflect. You may deem what you are stating a joke; but such jokes often end in serious earnest."

"I am not joking. I never was in more serious earnest in my life."

"But who told you Abigail stole a pork-pie and a pound of sausages?"

"A person on whose truthfulness I can thoroughly depend."

"Mrs. Childs?" suggested Mr. Katzen.

Mrs. Jeffley inclined her head.

"Well, really, my kind friend, I do not want to say anything offensive; but I think you ought to have more sense."

"I know, like Mr. Jeffley, you are prejudiced against Mrs. Childs, who is really a most excellent woman, and who, though she cannot help knowing Miss Weir to be her enemy, kept all this to herself till she felt it was wrong to hold her tongue any longer."

"I am not prejudiced against Mrs. Childs, who may be a paragon of virtue for aught I can tell; but still it seems hazardous to accuse a girl of theft, and such a theft, on the word of a charwoman."

"That is very true," agreed Mrs. Jeffley; "and as it would be my wish and is my endeavour to act fair by everyone, I would not have taken Mrs. Childs' bare word about the matter; but I asked Miss Weir herself, and she confessed what I had heard was

right. You can't go further than that, Mr. Katzen, now can you?"

"Miss Weir confessed to you that she stole those things—"

"With her own mouth," said Mrs. Jeffley, referring to the confession, not the theft.

"From whom?"

"From Philpot in Crutched Friars."

"And why did she steal them?"

"That is not for me to guess."

"And when did she do it? Dear Mrs. Jeffley, I am perplexed beyond imagination—as you have told me so much, tell me all."

"It must have been in the summer after she planted herself in Botolph Lane, because——"

"Good Lord!" interrupted Mr. Katzen, "has all this fuss been made over what she did when a child?"

"She was old enough to know better."

"Can you forgive me if I throw back that remark? Though still so young and charming, you are old enough to know better. What child is there who has not stolen something?"

"Gracious, how you talk, Mr. Katzen! I

am sure my children never took a penny that did not belong to them."

"We won't argue as to whether they did or not—you are an interested witness; and, at any rate, they never were hungry."

"Poor darlings! they would starve before they would touch what did not belong to them."

"All of which proves nothing, except that they are more virtuous or more foolish than Abigail."

"Oh! Of course you can see no fault in her. Well, I have only done my duty; and if hereafter you regret——"

"I will come to you for sympathy, dear Mrs. Jeffley. You are all that is good and kind, but I think—yes, I do think, you have made a mistake this time."

"I may—but I can't see it. I should not care for a wife who had done such a thing; but foreigners, I am aware, have strange notions about many things."

"They differ from English notions, certainly. After all, England is not the universe."

"I do not think it can be a bad notion

anywhere; that honesty is honesty. Even Abigail saw she need not expect to come to Fowkes' Buildings again."

" Poor Abigail!"

"You need not pity her so much. When I asked her, putting the question as nicely as I could, she said quite short, 'If you tell me who told you, I will tell you if it is true,' To be plain,' I answered, 'it was Mrs. Childs.' 'Mrs. Childs,' she repeated; 'now I wonder how she got to know? Yes, Mrs. Jeffley, it is quite true, and as you might not feel comfortable for the future in having me about your house, I won't come to it again.' And then and there she laid down the parcel of work I had looked out for her, and, without another word but 'Good-morning,' walked out."

"And all this took place--"

"Just an hour after breakfast this very day."

"So that figuratively the Peri, who has been shut out of Paradise, is now sitting in the old house with her back-hair down, crying her eyes out."

"If you are going to make fun of me, Mr. Katzen——"

"Not for the world. I shall go round to Botolph Lane, and after admonishing the culprit suitably, speak some little word of comfort——"

"If I had thought you were likely to take the matter as you have done, I would have stayed at home and attended to my own business."

"And who attends to business so well as you? What! must you go, dear Mrs. Jeffley?"

"I never ought to have come," she answered; "but there, when a girl, pretty or plain, is in question, the men are all alike."

"Mrs. Jeffley—her confession of faith," said Mr. Katzen to himself as the incensed Maria flounced out of the office; and, a good deal amused by the shocking story he had heard, he despatched Mr. Rothsattel to the West End and sat down at his writing-table, meaning to grapple with a mass of correspondence which had fallen into arrear.

He had been so engaged for some hours, when his attention was attracted by a modest tapping at the outer door, which had then been going on for several minutes, and resembled in its character an apologetic cough.

"Come in!" shouted Mr. Katzen; but no one appeared.

"Hang you, whoever you are!" muttered the Consul, rising and crossing the outer room.

With an impatient jerk he opened the door and beheld—Mrs. Childs!





CHAPTER III.

MRS. CHILDS' STORY.

ES—it was Mrs. Childs, well dressed, clean, cheerful, evidently extremely glad to see Mr. Katzen, and looking as though she expected the sight of her to prove equally pleasing to him.

"Is anybody dead?" exclaimed the Consul, whose knowledge of the dear woman was so exhaustive, he believed that only her neighbour's misfortune could produce such extraordinary hilarity.

"Dead! no, sir, the Lord be thanked," answered Mrs. Childs piously. "There's nobody dead nor thinking of dying so far as I am aware."

"Good," said Mr. Katzen; but as he reserved an opinion, added: "How is Mrs.

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Jeffley?" Though he had lately seen that lady, he could not tell what might have happened in the interim.

"Mrs. Jeffley, sir," returned her henchwoman, "is in her usual."

"And the family?"

"Are in their usual," said Mrs. Childs with an engaging smile.

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Katzen with hands deep in his pockets; then: "Won't you come in?" he added suddenly. Hitherto, he had thought all that had to be communicated might best be spoken on the threshold.

"If not ill-conveniencing you, sir."

"Inconvenience! Lord—no; always happy to spare time for old friends, and you are a very old friend, Mrs. Childs."

"And though it is too much honour for a gentleman like you to say 'friend'—faithful, sir"

"Indeed! yes," said Mr. Katzen, who knew not whether Mrs. Childs meant to invest her own savings, or tell him of some much greater person who hankered to do so. "Pray walk in," he added with a wave of his hand.

But Mrs. Childs was not to be persuaded to take precedence.

"After you, sir," she said. "I hope I knows my place."

"Well, if it must be so," Mr. Katzen answered, leading the way into his especial sanctum, which, as Mrs. Childs subsequently remarked, was "kep' by one as knew her business."

"It could have been no cleaner if I'd had the doing for him myself," she declared; and as she looked around at the various evidences of prosperity which the new Consul had gathered around him, a yearning regret seized her for not in bygone times having paid sufficient court to this rising sun, and secured a chance of bettering herself. "But there! lor, who'd ever a thought it?" she mentally considered, and so resigned herself to the slavery of Fowkes' Buildings.

"And now, Mrs. Childs," began Mr. Katzen, when he had at length, after some difficulty, induced his visitor to take a chair, "what can I do for you?"

"Thanking you humbly, sir, in a manner of speaking—nothing. I am poor, and have to

work hard; but good is no name for the lady I serve, and owing to her I can make both ends meet, for which I feel truly grateful. No, Mr. Katzen, begging pardon for making so free, I did not take the liberty of coming here this afternoon because I wanted any one thing for myself."

"For whom, then, do you want something?" asked Mr. Katzen.

"In a general way, sir, if you'll excuse me, I don't want nothink for nobody."

"But in a particular way, Mrs. Childs?"

"It would be useless for me to deny, sir—more especially to a gentleman so clever as yourself—I think there is a party to be served, a party as hasn't been too well treated, perhaps; but that's as it may be——"

"What sort of a party?" inquired the Consul.

"One I'm sure you wouldn't like to see put upon," returned Mrs. Childs after the manner of an oracle.

"Who is the gentleman somebody is 'putting upon'?"

"It is a lady."

"A lady! Mrs. Jeffley?—no?" for Mrs.

Childs shook her head and pursed up her mouth. "Then who in Heaven's name is she?"

"Ah, sir, you ought not to need to ask."

"I know that, but I must ask—for one reason, Mrs. Childs, because my time is money. Now, who is the lady who is being put upon?"

"Miss Abigail Weir," answered Mrs. Childs sullenly.

She had intended to make a point, and Mr. Katzen by his impatience spoiled the whole situation.

"Soh! And who is putting upon her?"

"A many, às far as I can make out."

"Then why don't you go and tell her so?"

"Ah, sir! clever as she thinks herself, she'll need somebody far and away cleverer still to see her through this."

"See her through what?" asked Mr. Katzen, with an uneasy memory of the pound of sausages and adjuncts mentioned by Mrs. Jeffley.

"What she is being done out of."

At this point the Consul grew desperate.

"See, Mrs. Childs," he said, "you came

I suppose, to tell me something. Hurry up, like a good soul. Don't let us go on playing as the children at cross questions and crooked answers, but say what you have got to say in a breath. I won't interrupt you."

This was about the last concession Mrs. Childs desired.

Dialogue was her forte. She had never put the fact in plain language to herself, for true genius is generally modest, but the conviction pervaded her whole soul.

Nevertheless, her sense of duty was strong. She would essay narrative. Even in that, something told her that she could make a hit.

"You are perhaps aware, sir," thus she began, "that a little while ago Mrs. Jeffley got a cook to suit her."

Mr. Katzen inclined his head.

"She was a first-rate cook, fit for any nobleman's kitchen. She had been used to good service, and was altogether, as I often told Mrs. Jeffley, another sort from anything we were accustomed to see in Fowkes' Buildings."

"One for Mrs. Jeffley," thought Mr. Katzen.

- "The mistress was greatly taken with her, and, indeed, I might say she was seemingly without a fault. Many's the time I looked at her and wondered to myself what could have brought her down so low."
- "Another for Mrs. J.," considered Mr. Katzen.
- "She had lived with the best of families, and showed me characters that might have touched a heart of stone. One night it all came out—she was subject to fits. She was took with one while she was broiling a salmon cutlet for Captain Hassell's supper, and went off all of a sudden. I happened to have stayed late that night. It seemed as if it was to be, and without disturbing Mrs. Jeffley, I sent Sophiar, who chanced to have come round to say a word to me, for a doctor, and dished up the cutlet, and did what I could for Mrs. Roddy."
- "Meaning by Mrs. Roddy, I presume, the lady addicted to fits?" interposed Mr. Katzen in search of information.
- "Ah, indeed, and that is she, poor soul!—she do suffer awful—as truthfully I can bear witness."

"Was she able to stay on in Fowkes' Buildings?" hurriedly put in Mr. Katzen, who feared that having shunted Mrs. Childs off on a fresh line of rails she might, unless stopped, go on till night.

"No. Mrs. Jeffley spoke to her very kind but plain—she put the case quite right. 'You see, Mrs. Roddy,' says she——"

"Pardon me, Mrs. Childs, but are these interesting details leading us on, or back, to Miss Weir?"

"To Miss Weir, and none other; because if it had not so happened for Mrs. Roddy to be taken with the fit that night, she might never have come to me, and if she had not come to me, ten chances to one she would never have set eyes on Miss Abigail——"

"Oh! she set eyes on Miss Abigail, did she?"

"Yes, sir—the way of it was this. When Mrs. Jeffley said, 'Of course it is hardly your fault, Mrs. Roddy, though I do think you ought to have told you were given to go off at a minute's notice; so, although I can't have you put in your month—for fits are a risk I couldn't run, being worse than sudden death,

in a manner of speaking, since that's only once and done with-I'll give you your full wages and a trifle over,' the question came up, where was the poor woman to go. She had a brother far away in the country, but he is married and has a houseful of children. 'No, Mrs. Childs,' she said, and she was crying, 'I can't go there, for Hannah' (that's her brother's wife, you understand) 'takes no sort of control over either boys or girls. What to do I don't know, for I have spent most of my savings paying for lodgings and a bit to put in my lips while out of place, which I have been more nor half time, and money melts fast when you are taking out of your hoard constant; and what's to become of me the Lord only knows.' So, sir, I couldn't stand that; it hurt me like, to think of one who ought to have been very differently placed, having no roof to put her head under, and I said, 'Now, my dear, what you had best do is come to me. We'll all make shift together somehow, and I'll only charge you a trifle, for I'd think it a sin to impose on anybody so afflicted.' Perhaps I ought not to have done it, sir, but I'm that feeling I

seemed I couldn't abide the notion of her being driven out to look for a shelter."

"The transaction reflects the highest credit on all concerned," remarked Mr. Katzen; "and thus Mrs. Roddy now resides with you and your niece. You are all one happy family."

"She's just like one of ourselves, only more so," agreed Mrs. Childs.

"And where does Miss Weir come in?" asked the Consul.

"Well, sir, it happened in this way. I had been out of an errand for Mrs. Jeffley, and I was stepping along brisk, when I met Miss Weir walking as fast as she could go. She did not seem to see me, and if she had she wouldn't have spoken. Perhaps you know, sir," added Mrs. Childs parenthetically, "that Miss Weir has misjudged me cruel. I never had a thought in my heart but for her good. It was not fitting, and I'll say so to my dying day, for a young lady to put herself to do the sort of things she did, demeaning herself and everybody belonging to her, and taking the bread out of people's mouths bound to work for their livings; not that it

signified to me, sir, in the least—being fortunate enough to step into a better place than the old house, and find a better mistress than Mr. Brisco ever was a master."

"No better mistress than your merits deserve, Mrs. Childs," said Mr. Katzen politely. "And now, if I may inquire without breaking the thread of your narrative, when did the momentous meeting with Miss Weir take place?"

"When, sir? Why, no later agone than this morning as ever was."

"Indeed, and what happened after she passed you?"

"Why, I just took a look back at her, and turned into Fowkes' Buildings, and there, up the passage, who should I see, standing stiff as a statute, but Mrs. Roddy—her eyes were all of a stare, and she seemed transfixed.

"'For the Lord's sake, what's the matter with you?' I said. 'Do you feel like going off into another fit?'

"She didn't take any notice, except to say in a dazed kind of way, which made me feel queer all over:

"" Who is she—who is she?"

- ""Who's who?" I asked, thinking she was a bit off her head.
- "'Why, that young lady—you could not help meeting her.'
- "'I met nobody I know, except Abigail Weir.'
- "'Weir, Weir,' she says, throwing up her hands. 'Yes, that was the name of the man Miss Olive married—I could have sworn she was Miss Olive, as I remember her twenty odd years ago. It was like meeting a ghost!"

"This grows interesting," commented Mr. Katzen.

"I was surprised, sir, you may be sure, as well I might be; and saying to myself, 'There's something behind all this,' I told Mrs. Roddy to stay where she was while I ran indoors. She was on her way to see Mrs. Jeffley, but she seemed to have forgotten all that; and as I found Mrs. Jeffley was rather put out about something, I took Mrs. Roddy back to my place as soon as I could. Poor thing, she was all of a tremble, and as white as ashes—so I got her into a chair and sent Sophiar for a drop of unsweetened gin. After

a while she told me how she once lived in a clergyman's family down in the country—not a poor sort of clergyman, but one as kept up an establishment and a suite of servants, and had carriages and riding horses, and such like; you know what I mean, sir."

"Precisely," said Mr. Katzen. "A true descendant of the first apostles."

"He was something high," went on Mrs. Childs, "and he and his wife consorted with the best, and they had money to back them up, and hearts to spend their money."

"'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven,'" remarked the Consul.

"They had everything, at any rate, to fit them for it. He hardly did any work at all left preaching to curates and such like, but paid them liberal, and now and then had them to dinner. He was affable to everybody, rich and poor, but knew how to keep his distance, and expected other people to keep their distance too."

"What an admirable person!"

"He had one daughter, but never a son; even in this world, sir, you see, sir, there's mostly a drawback somewhere." "Too true, Mrs. Childs. Often it is having a son proves the trouble. And what was the name of this divine who had only one fair daughter?"

"Sandworth, sir; and the daughter wasn't fair, but dark as she could be."

"Handsome though, I suppose."

"A many thought her so, but that might be on account of her money; she was reported to be worth her weight in golden guineas."

Mr. Katzen had tried silence and he had tried speech; now in despair he again relapsed into silence. Mrs. Childs waited, but as he did the same, she was forced to proceed.

"Lords and baronets were after the young lady; she might have had the pick of the county, for though her temper was short, her father's purse was long. Her days were spent in one gaiety after another—not a thing you could name but she had a hand in; and the father and mother were so doting on her they could not see a black feather about their darling."

Even this sentence failed to elicit any remark from Mr. Katzen—no doubt he re-

membered there had been other parents who felt sure their young crows were white.

"So there was this one, and that one and the other," resumed Mrs. Childs, after she had waited in vain for a single clap of encouragement, "hanging about the house for a smile or a word from Miss Olive; but she never seemed to favour one more than another. At last a circus came to the county town, and though Mr. and Mrs. Sandworth would not go to see plays, they went to see the horse-riding, and so did the daughter. There was one handsome and finely-puttogether man, as rode splendid. He was a sight to behold! While the circus stayed, Miss Sandworth contrived to go with some one nearly every afternoon. Then it went away, and before long the young lady was missing."

"Gone with the individual who was a sight to behold?" hazarded Mr. Katzen.

"Gone after him, sir," corrected Mrs. Childs. "He did not want her, if all accounts be true. It was he wrote to the father where she was——"

[&]quot;Well?" asked Mr. Katzen.

"There and then the father cast her off like an old shoe. Mrs. Roddy says the way that clergyman went on was shameful. He called his daughter all the names he could lay his tongue to, cursed her up hill and down dale, and wished dreadful things might happen to himself if he ever spoke to her again, or left her a penny of fortune. And you know, sir, however the daughter might have acted, that wasn't right for a father——"

"I presume the gentleman in tights and spangles was Mr. Weir."

"So I'm given to understand-"

"And our friend Miss Abigail is his child?"

"His child. You see the way of it was this, sir. He married Miss Olive Sandworth against his judgment; but when the old gentleman wouldn't take her back, what else was he to do? For a while they didn't get on so badly—though it must have been a sore change for her, even if the mother did send money on the sly. At first he earned a good bit; but after a while he met with an accident, and could ride no more, and the mother died, and the help from her stopped too. After

that, Mrs. Roddy could tell me nothing further, except that Mr. Sandworth—who died about a year ago, worth thousands and tens of thousands—left every sixpence to his sister, a widow; and there's all the money poor Miss Abigail ought to have had—gone, as you may say, to a stranger. It seemed to me as if I couldn't contain myself when I remembered the night that dear child came among us. Mr. Sandworth must have been made of wrought-iron—for though his daughter might have offended him, the innocent lamb had done no wrong."

"It does seem very hard; but I am afraid neither you nor I, Mrs. Childs, can set the world to rights."

"Ah, sir! the world is in better hands than ours," said Mrs. Childs piously.

"We are bound to believe so," answered the Consul; "but it must often try your faith to see things going quite contrary to the way you want them."

Not having a platitude ready at the moment, Mrs. Childs fell back on the original question.

"Now, sir, I've got that off my mind, vol. III. 46

Lord be thanked, so I'll go. I can creep to bed to-night with a light heart, for I know you'll see that Miss Abigail gets justice."

- "You have told me a truly interesting story," said Mr. Katzen politely; "but as for getting justice done, I fear that is beyond me."
- "Why, sir, ought not whatever there was to have come to her?"
- "Perhaps; but unfortunately it did not. Mr. Sandworth left it to this lady——"
 - "Who is as rich as a Jew."
- "Being rich will not make her any the more ready to part with that she has got; but I will think over the affair. I should like to serve Miss Weir, though I suppose Mr. Francis Scott is by rights the person who ought to take up such a business."

"Why, sir?"

Mrs. Childs asked the question with an expression of surprised innocence that delighted the Consul.

"If Miss Weir be attached to Mr. Scott, and Mr. Scott be attached to Miss Weir, who has so good a right to look after the young lady's interests? No one could look after them so well."

- "Lord, sir! who ever could have put that foolish notion into your head?"
- "Well—between friends, you know, there need be no secrets—it was your intelligent niece."
 - "Sophiar?"
- "Sophiar!" repeated Mr. Katzen, "and none other."
- "The young fool!" said Mrs. Childs, with conviction. It seemed a hard saying, but it was forced out of her. "And after all my warnings, too. 'Whatever you do, my dear,'—my very words, sir—'never let such a thing pass your lips.' Mr. Scott indeed! But wait till I get home, and I'll give her such a talking to as she won't forget in a hurry."
- "I do not think I would do that, Mrs. Childs. We must all speak to somebody, and who could Sophia have found so safe to speak to as myself?"
- "That's very true, sir; but she ought to have held her tongue as I charged her. It's a small member, the Bible says; still, it's big enough to cause wars and rumours of wars, and if she doesn't learn to keep it in check

while she's young, she'll maybe come to want bread when she's old."

"I hope not," said Mr. Katzen, "for I consider her a most entertaining person."

"She ought to be beholden to you, I'm sure, sir, for you've never seen her at her best, nor heard her neither. I'm sure, of a night when I go home tired, it's as good as a play to listen to her. Mrs. Roddy says, 'Why don't you try to get her on the stage? Many a one would give pounds to have her.' Ah! she's a good girl. I had not been in a minute before she told me of your kindness, for which I am sure I return you many thanks, sir," added Mrs. Childs, curtseying gracefully. "She said you went away a-laughing, but I little thought what you'd been a-laughing at."

"Well, don't scold her—she has done no harm. And I will consider about Miss Weir, and——" here he pressed a sovereign into Mrs. Childs' hand, spite of her "Oh, please, sir—no, I couldn't think of taking a farthing. I'm sure if I could serve the young lady, I shouldn't mind what trouble I took. I'd get up at any hour, and so would Sophiar—she

was always partial to Miss Weir, and no wonder."

"I remember how much attached you always were to the young lady," said Mr. Katzen. "How pleasantly you always spoke to and of her. By-the-bye, what is that funny story you have been telling Mrs. Jeffley, about some sausages and brawn?"

"Lor, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Childs, "you don't mean to say Mrs. Jeffley has been going over all that to you! The worst of the missus is, nobody can say anything to her in the way of a joke, but she takes it in earnest. I declare I must have been as foolish as Sophiar to let slip a word of the matter. I am that vexed I could bite my tongue out, if biting would do any good, which it won't. The remark dropped out of my mouth careless like, and I never thought she'd take any notice of it."

"What you said was true enough, however, I suppose."

"It was true in a manner of speaking; for if there's one way I am more dependable than another, it is in the matter of being exact. Still, it was spoke casual. But, believe

me or not, sir, Mrs. Jeffley took the whole thing as if it was ever so. Poor Miss Abigail might have been the biggest thief in London—and it was just a simple matter. No harm meant or done. I would not for worlds such a foolish story had passed my lips."

"I have a notion it was a pity," answered Mr. Katzen. "However, it's done, and can't be undone."

"No, it can't be undone. Words spoken is like water spilt—you can't get either of them back again."

Having delivered herself of which truism Mrs. Childs, tightly grasping the sovereign she meant to retain unshared with Mrs. Roddy, curtseyed to the door, where a sudden idea striking her, she paused and said:

"Begging your pardon, sir; but if ever you should want a person to do for you, I hope you won't forget me. Early or late, I'd think it a pleasure to wait on you."

"How about Mrs. Jeffley, in that case?" he asked.

"Well, sir, I hope I need not tell you, I am that fond of Mrs. Jeffley my inclination would be to stay with and serve her, hand

and foot, as long as I was able to get about. But it is not right of any of us to follow our own inclination and to become, when we get past our work, chargeable to the parish. We've duties, sir; and I consider mine is to myself and Sophiar. Mrs. Jeffley would be the first to acknowledge that, and to say, 'If ever you have a chance of bettering yourself, take it.' And besides, sir-" Here Mrs. Childs drew a step nearer Mr. Katzen and dropped into a whisper and mystery, "Jeffleys' ain't what it was; there's coming and there's going, but there's more going than there's coming. I see what I see-though perhaps it's not my place either to see or hear-but a word has been spoken. It was said, and not so long ago, Mrs. Jeffley had got 'uppish'-such a wicked story! For if there ever was one humble and lowly, it is my good missus; so you understand there might come a time when she would feel even me a burden, and be glad to know I was serving one she thinks so much of as she does of you. I can cook, sir, well!" added Mrs. Childs cheerfully; "and in a manner of speaking there's nothing comes amiss to me.

So I thought I'd make so bold as to ask you to bear me in mind."

"Certainly, Mrs. Childs—certainly, I will bear you in mind," answered the Consul, with great politeness. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I *must* write my letters. Good-evening;" and Mr. Katzen joyfully shut her out.

But he wrote no letters. He walked up and down the inner office till his clerk returned, when he locked up his papers and prepared for departure.

"Shall I go round and see how the charming Abigail is amusing herself?" he considered, "or return to Fowkes' Buildings and run the chance of another interview with Mrs. Jeffley, who, says popular report, 'grows uppish.' No, I will take me to the play. It is long since I have seen a play. Perhaps 'tis that makes me thick, that I know not either what ought to be done, or how to do it."





CHAPTER IV.

"I LOVE YOU."

money "to go to the play," he might have chanced, quite free of charge, to see a domestic drama of great interest put on the boards in Botolph Lane.

It was nearly seven o'clock before the offices were closed, since, much to Frank Scott's disgust, Mr. Fulmer found many things to see to and speak about on his way from Dunstan's Hill to Hamilton Place.

He often did so now. Owing to some cause — sufficient, no doubt, to him, but aggravating to other people — he was devoting himself to business with such zeal as he had never previously been known to evince.

At last he went—at last; and Frank, after turning down the gas, left the office with the intention of going at once to Fowkes' Buildings in search of tea.

For a moment he paused in the hall, perhaps with a faint hope of seeing Abigail. In like manner he paused most evenings, only to meet disappointment. In Mr. Brisco's house, Abigail did not intend any chance meetings to take place.

For a waif and a stray, the girl owned a fine sense of honour—a sense as strong as that held theoretically by many worthy people. Since her sternly virtuous decision, indeed, she had rarely met Mr. Scott anywhere, even by accident—their encounter on the preceding evening having been as unexpected as agreeable. Now and again they ran across each other—living almost within pistol-shot, and neither being a hermit, how could it happen otherwise? but in the old house he never saw her, save as any other tenant might.

Her lover knew he could not have wished her to act differently, and yet so contradictory are young men that he lingered every night in the hope that she might appear. The very sight of her would have refreshed him after Mr. Fulmer's endless questioning and inspection. He was tired and irritable, yet, as he stood there, the peace of the old house seemed to fall around and enfold him—to lay a soothing hand on his heart and still its anxieties, for the time, to rest.

How quiet it was! Upstairs, the woman who came in each night and morning to tidy up the offices was clearing away the accumulated dust and dirt of another day; but the doors were closed, and he could hear no sound of busy broom or noisy scrubbing-brush.

The house might have been tenanted by the dead. It was a strange abode, silent and lonely as some country churchyard at midnight. In the midst of a great city, there yet entered no echo of the world's noise. Somehow, as he stood, the fancy struck Frank that in its stately separation from the surrounding meanness and turmoil it was like some great soul on the earth, but not of the earth; associating with things vile, yet remaining unstained by them; keeping itself

from sin, suffering no impurity to dim the brightness of God's image enshrined within; standing apart from the broad highway while the rush and roar of common life with its passing sorrows and fleeting joys, with its sordid aims and cruel jealousies, swept on and ever on, leaving behind no trace of having passed by, save dust and ashes—dust unlaid by forgotten tears, ashes uncheered by songs of which no echo lingered; by smiles and hopes that had left no memory of sunshine, but were themselves dust and ashes too.

It was a foolish fancy; but the house was one where, if one stood still for a moment, through the silence unbidden fancies came thick as motes dancing in the summer air.

For a minute or two longer than usual Frank stood thus, dreaming of the lives that had been lived in the old house, of the might-have-been of his own life, of the might-be he longed for, of the might-be that more possibly was to come. Then he turned to go.

The entrance into Botolph Lane had long been closed, so he was obliged to cross the hall in order to reach the door giving on Love Lane. The marble sounded hollow under his feet, and the whole house seemed full of muffled echoes. After all, it was an eerie place. Yet Abigail loved it—Abigail, who had grown up in it without fear; Abigail, who spent so much of her young life there alone, almost absolutely alone.

And how bright she was, how cheerful, how pleasant to talk to, how good to look at! Abigail, so clever, so useful, so true, so honest, so capable!—not in his eyes alone (he was a lover, and so, with such a sun shining into them, might not see quite clearly), but in the eyes of other people, who had one and all known her since she came amongst them.

"Frank!"

He was so wrapped up in his own imaginings that he quite started at the word.

He looked around, but could see no one.

- "Who called me?" he asked.
- "I—Abigail. Come here; I want to speak to you."

She had his hand in hers by this time, and was leading him along the unlighted passage

to the sitting-room, where, on one Whitsun Tuesday, she sat blithe, saucy, pretty, sparring with the Consul, then just appointed, for New Andalusia.

"And to think, my darling, that I did not recognise your voice, that it seemed strange to me!" he was saying as they entered; then, when he saw her face, he asked, "What is the matter, Abigail—what has happened?"

"Not much," she answered, "but enough. Won't you sit down?"

"You are ill, dearest," he said. There was a drawn look about her face, a brilliant colour in her cheeks, a brightness in her eyes he was alarmed to see.

"I am *not* ill," she replied determinedly; "but I have something to tell you, something to say to you."

"Yes." He grasped the back of a chair, and stood looking at her over it. What was —what could she be going to say?

"You must hear my story from me," Abigail went on, "before you hear it from anyone else. Do you remember, long ago, my wishing to tell it, and you would not let me? Oh!" she added passionately, "I

wish you had allowed me to have my way then!"

"Why more than now?" he asked.

"Because"—she did not seem abashed, but spoke as some one on a deathbed might—"I did not love you so much then. I think it would have been easier to part."

"We will never part," he said.

"This morning, Mrs. Jeffley asked me if it was true—she had heard the story from Mrs. Childs. How she heard it, I do not know; and I was so young, Frank, and I had been taught no good thing except by my father, and after his death, hungry and cold and miserable, I had to shift for my wretched little self. Forgive me, dear, forgive me for ever having thought I could be a fit wife to you."

"For God's sake!" said the man she addressed, "do not torture me any longer. Whatever you may have done, you are—you must always be—the one woman in the world to me. But tell me the trouble, and let us bear the burden together, or rather, let let me bear it all for you."

He stretched out his hand as he spoke, to

take hers, but she put it gently aside. To her lover she was most gentle, as likewise to children and old people. Happy and prosperous, she might some day be a charming woman—sympathetic, piquante, comprehending; but what chance had she of ever being either?

With gathered years she was losing the kittenish light-heartedness of early youth, and who could tell but that when it departed some of her charm would vanish too? Most probably sorrow, and that battle with the world which is good for but few women, and softens the manners of none, would develop all the hardness which in both sexes lies so close to strength; but as she rejected Frank's caress, nothing sweeter or tenderer than her gesture could be imagined. Poor Abigail! quite unconsciously she was making it more difficult than ever for man born of woman to leave and forget her.

"You cannot bear it for me," she said; "you can have nothing in common with a thief."

[&]quot;A thief!" he repeated blankly.

[&]quot;Yes." Her tone was firm enough now.

"Just such a little thief as stands any day with his head hardly reaching to the top of the dock, and who never sees the sun again but with the taint of the prison upon him—that is what I was. I wonder—oh! I wonder," she added passionately, "how I ever could have been happy after. Yet I was—I was. I did not mind—I forgot, I suppose, or I did not think it signified—till I came to care for you."

"So long as you care for me, my darling——" he was beginning, when she stopped him.

"You do not understand," said Abigail.
"I was a thief in intention as well as in fact.
It is true; but for Mr. Brisco I should have been a thief all my life."

"He did you one good turn, at all events," remarked the young man, trying to speak lightly.

"One!" she answered; "ONE!! What do I not owe to him! Though I never—never can blot out the days of my shameful childhood, still——"

"It was agreed that those days were never again to be mentioned between us," he inter-

posed. "My dearest! why will you grieve yourself and pain me by speaking of that past, dead and buried so long ago?"

"I hoped it was—I thought it was!" she cried; "but oh, how foolish to suppose anything we have done ever can be buried! Even in this world," she went on wildly, "there is a resurrection; our sins rise again, not like ghosts, but alive, more alive than when first committed."

Her forced calmness was breaking down; a little more, and she would lose all self-control.

"Tell me what you mean," Frank said, as coolly as he could. "If we must part—though I can at present conceive of no reason which should part two who are so thoroughly one—at least, let me know the reason. You are a thief, you say," with a forced laugh. "What did you steal—the crown jewels?"

"If I had, it might not have seemed so dreadful; mine was a poor mean theft—everything about me is poor and mean, I think. It was in the dusk of an evening in late spring, after I came here first. Ah! how

I recall it! I met a starved-looking woman carrying a basket with a few primroses she had failed to sell, and I could not help looking at her—she was thinner even than I."

"My poor little love!"

"Mrs. Childs had told me to get two ounces of beef," she went on with a plaintive smile at the pettiness of the errand which had been fraught with such results, "from that large shop in Crutched Friars. It was not often we could afford to buy anything of the sort, but we sometimes dealt there for more humble fare."

Frank clenched his hand tightly under the table. "And they knew me—they had come to know me because Mrs. Childs never went on an errand herself if she could avoid doing so."

"Dear, get it over," entreated her lover, as though she had still been a child dallying with a nauseous dose of medicine.

"There were a great many people waiting to be served, and I was so small and so poorly dressed that no one gave way for me to get to the counter, even in my turn. It was for that reason I pushed at last up to the

top of the shop, where on a cross counter there were some parcels placed ready for the boy to take out. I remember what passed through my mind, that all these things were for somebody else, while we had nothing—they were not even in a hurry to serve me. I thought it was very hard. Mr. Brisco had sheltered me, and he was forced to be content with a thin slice of meat as a treat. If I could only take a saveloy—perhaps he liked saveloys. Does it not sound absurd?" And Abigail burst into hysterical weeping.

"Stop!" said the young man. "I want to hear no more—I will hear no more!"

She put up her hand to hush his impatience. "To cut it all short," she said, "I took what lay nearest to me, and slipped out behind the backs of the customers with three parcels. I was glad when I got into the street with them," she went on. "I had no fear then, no remorse; instead, I felt jubilant. After a time I remembered I was without the beef, so I went to another shop and got it. After that I went home.

"I let Mrs. Childs lay the cloth, place my purchase on a plate, leave the kettle, and go home. Then my turn came. I pulled open the papers and found a pork pie, some brawn and sausages. I got a pan and cooked the sausages, I made the tea, and called Mr. Brisco."

"'Where did these things come from?' he asked, and his tone seemed so terrible to me that I shivered.

"He looked about the table and asked again, 'Child, do you know how these things came here?'

"'I brought them in,' I said.

"' Who gave them to you?"

"I was so frightened I could not answer.

"'Abigail,' he tried again. 'Where did you get these things?'

"I tried to speak.

"'Stop a minute,' he said; 'take time, tell me what you like, only do not tell me a lie. I never forgive a lie. It is to me the unpardonable sin.'"

"God pardon him," murmured the young man.

"I got it out somehow, trembling with fear. I had been so used to blows, I cringed, expecting one; but he only looked at me, and said, 'So you're a thief.' He sat still for a minute, and then told me to put on my hat.

"That unloosed my tongue. If I had never spoken to him freely before, I spoke then. He could not get in a word—sobbing and crying, I prayed him not to send me away. I promised impossibilities. 'Only let me stay,' I entreated. 'Only—only—do not turn me out.'

"'I do not intend to turn you out this time,' he answered. 'I will give you another chance. Dry your eyes, and put on your hat.'

"I put on my hat, but I could not cease crying. We went along the street side by side, the people looking at us as we passed. He took me straight to the shop and asked to see the master. We were shown into a little back room, and then Mr. Brisco told the man what I had done. 'Of course you could send the child to prison,' he said; 'but I hope you will not do that. I will pay you for what she took, and promise for her that she will never be so wicked again.'

"I can't tell you, Frank, what I felt. If he had beaten me black and blue, I should not have suffered half so much as I did in hearing my sin told out loud.

"The man thanked Mr. Brisco for being so honourable, and took the money, which seemed to me an enormous sum.

"For days those things were always set out on the table, and then Mr. Brisco would say, 'They are paid for, so you may have a piece if you choose.' But I couldn't eat them, they would have choked me; my bit of dry bread seemed sweet by comparison. So at last they went bad, and had to be thrown out. We had no butter or tea till the money was made up again. Mr. Brisco fared as poorly as I. It was then I began to try to be of some help in the house. Mrs. Childs was ill, and Sophia would perhaps do one room and leave all the rest. I was useful and saved expense, and after a time I thought little about my theft, though Mr. Brisco made me go to the shop for whatever we wanted.

"It was not till I knew you that the full shame and disgrace of what I had done began to haunt me. I told you everything but that; and I tried, you know, and you would not hear me. And then I thought perhaps it did not matter so much, as nobody knew except the shopkeeper and Mr. Brisco, and they seemed to have forgotten. This morning, when Mrs. Jeffley spoke to me, I felt distracted. I was impudent, I think, to her; but walking along the street it seemed to me that I was branded, that 'thief' must be written on my forehead;" and then Abigail broke down fairly, and covering her face with her hand, wept softly.

In an instant Frank ceased pacing the room and was beside her. "Abigail," he said—"Abigail, my own, look at me: well, then listen to me. If you had committed all the sins in the Decalogue, you would be Abigail to me. Why will you harass yourself about this matter? What can it signify, poor child-poor little mite? Why, dear, I love you, if that be possible, a thousand times better than I did before! Part—we will never part! I will take all your troubles on me—I have now taken my resolution. Whenever Mr. Brisco returns, I will speak to him; and if he refuses you to me, as I think he will, we must marry without his consent."

"No, no-never!" she sobbed.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he persisted. "I have waited too long already. My darling, talk to me; forgive me for having kept you in a false position, for ever inducing you to hold any secret from Mr. Brisco. He does not deserve such love as yours; but that cannot make my conduct right. If we have to be poor, we shall be poor together." He knelt down beside her, and passing one arm round her waist, tried with the other hand to raise her head; but she kept it obstinately bent.

"No," she said, "I will never marry you—never bring shame upon you."

"I am certain you will not do that," he answered; and so by degrees—chiding, upbraiding her for distrust, laughing at her idea that he would ever give her up, reproaching himself for having been but a tardy lover, not worthy of winning such a wife—he managed to lay her tear-stained face on his breast, "where I will give you leave to weep out your trouble," he said tenderly, and so babbled on as foolish lovers do.

It is a foolish, foolish lay they sing, but sweet. In all the world's grand harmonies, there is nothing so musical as that simple song, of which, spite of its endless repetitions, its constant monotony, men and women never tire. To lovers now it is still fresh as when first its tones rose and fell among the flowers of Eden, and it will be fresh still to generations yet unborn—when tongues that speak and ears that hear to-day, are dumb and deaf in death.

And to Frank and Abigail it seemed so beautiful that the old house which kept silence to listen was transformed, while the music lasted, to a fairy palace; and they forgot the hardness of their own lives and the burdens they had to bear, forgot everything save their own supreme happiness, and the entrancing beauty of that strange melody.

"I love you!—I love you!—I love you!" That was the beginning and end, the burden, the refrain, the solo, and the chorus. "I love you!" Simple words, yet containing all that makes life worth living, the whole wisdom and folly of existence.

"I love you, Abigail!" he repeated for the hundredth time; and with eyes still soft and wet with tears she answered, "I love you!"

The girl had not quite closed the door when she led Frank into her room, and with the sound of the music made by themselves thrilling their ears and satisfying their hearts, they remained unconscious that any auditor was present till they were startled by a voice which said:

"So this is the sort of thing that goes on when I am from home!"

"Yes, sir."

It was Frank who answered — calmly, though a clap of thunder would not have surprised him so much.

Abigail's lips formed the word "No," but she could not utter a sound.

- "You are a disreputable scoundrel!"
- "That I am not," replied Frank.
- "No man but a scoundrel would have taken advantage of such an opportunity to tempt a girl to compromise herself."
- "Abigail will never be compromised by me."
- "I shall take care that she is not. Leave my house this instant, and never set foot in it again. To-morrow I mean to lay the whole case before your employers."

- "You must do exactly as you please about that."
 - "You are insolent."
- "I do not mean to be so. I only want you to hear what I have to say."
- "I will hear nothing, sir. I have seen too much."
- "You have seen precisely what I meant you to know whenever you returned home. This is the first time I have spoken one word of love to Abigail under your roof, and having spoken it, I determined at once to ask you for her. We want to marry—there is nothing dishonourable in that."
 - "Marry!" repeated Mr. Brisco scornfully.
- "Yes. I love Abigail, and she loves me. What better can we do than marry?"
 - "Separate."
- "Oh no! we are not going to separate. We have known each other too long, and love each other too well to part."
- "You have known each other an immense period, no doubt—since last Christmas—quite a lifetime; but, long or short, there must now be an end of it. Leave my house, and do not compel me to use force."

"I will not leave your house till you answer my question. I want to marry Abigail. Will you give your consent? We are not strangers to one another. I have always meant to marry her, and I mean to marry her now. I am not rich, but I have enough to keep her. You may trust her to me. I will make her a good and faithful husband—God helping me."

"You will not make her a husband of any sort, good, bad, or indifferent."

"But why do you object?"

"Why? If for no other reason, for the underhand manner in which you have tried to engage a girl's affections. There is nothing fair and honest about you, sir—because your master has an office here, you, his servant, availed yourself of the facilities offered to entangle this young woman into an engagement. You seize the occasion of my absence to sneak into my house without thinking or caring for the damage you may do to her reputation——"

"It was not his fault—I asked him," faltered Abigail.

"That only makes matters worse. There was a time when you would not have been

so treacherous, not so risked your good name. As for you, sir, I decline to continue the argument further. May I beg you to relieve me of your presence?"

"I cannot leave the matter in this state; whatever you may think, it is a serious one to me. It involves the happiness of my life. I tell you fairly, I am not going to give up Abigail. I would rather marry her with your consent—but I will marry her without, if you refuse it."

"And how dare you, a stranger, talk of marrying the girl without my consent? She has known you at most but a few months——"

"She has known me for years," interrupted Frank.

"Every sentence you utter makes your conduct worse. You have taught her deception, aided and abetted her in acting a lie. You would steal her away from one who has stood her friend—out of a house where, till she saw you, she was at least safe. Who are you, sir?" went on the old man, lashing himself up into a fury—"who are you that you should ask me for a girl immeasurably your

superior, and propose to marry her on the wretched pittance you are not certain to receive for more than a week at any time?"

"As for that," retorted Frank, "my pittance cannot be much less than you have expected her to live on here, and for the rest, who am I?—I think you put it in that way."

"Yes, I did."

"I am your son!"

Mr. Brisco paused for one second before he said, "It is false!"

"It is true. I had not intended to tell you, now, or in this way; but it is true."

"Frank Scott is not my son;" and Mr. Brisco laughed scornfully.

"Ralph Francis Brisco is-and I am he!"

There was a pause, during which his father looked at him fixedly; then he tottered to a seat in silence. "Are you indeed my son," he said at last, "my son who left me so long ago?"

Frank, moved by some subtle impulse, without answering in words, stretched out his hand, which the old man clasped.

They were alone. Abigail had slipped away out of the room, up the staircase

through the darkness, to her own narrow chamber. The woman had finished all cleaning and departed; in the old house there reigned a stillness like unto death. And so the night crept on apace, and Abigail, sitting beside her bed, watched and listened, and thought of the vigils she had kept under the starlight—under the moonlight—in the winter blackness—watching the summer dawn.





CHAPTER V.

FRANK'S CONFESSION.

O days Abigail could remember had ever passed so heavily in the old house as the fifteen which followed after that night. Just at first, in the presence of his son, Mr. Brisco expanded, as a plant after languishing in the chilly March winds will revive under the watery gleams of April sunshine; but it was the revival preceding decay.

The old root could put forth no fresh green suckers. The damp and the cold of a starved youth and struggling manhood had well-nigh killed all life worth having. He said to himself, "After a night of sorrow, joy has come to me with the morning—I will enjoy!" But lo! the power of enjoyment was gone.

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Whatever bitterness there might have been in Frank's heart towards his father—and at one time it was full of bitterness—died away as he came to understand no real happiness could ever now be his.

He had placed himself out of sympathy with his kind, and it was impossible again to rivet the link rudely snapped so many a year agone. He seemed to desire his son's company always, never to be easy when Frank was out of his sight, yet he had little to say to him when they were together. The chain of silence himself had forged, bound him with iron fetters.

Even had he wished to talk, which is problematical, he lacked the power. He had for years lived so entirely with himself, to himself, that all the delicate feelers most men put out towards their fellows were withered. He had lost touch with humanity. He had grown to care for nothing, think of nothing, but himself, and the one purpose on which his heart was set.

He asked no details of the events which had filled his son's life since they parted. Ralph had returned, and he cared for nothing further. The hunger a parent usually feels to learn all a child has seen, suffered, enjoyed, felt, striven for, gained, lost during absence, was unknown to him. For father and son the past held no common memory save that of pain. The present was now to Mr. Brisco no more than the present had been for years—a means to an end, a step in a journey.

Association with him was weary work. Nothing but the conviction that his father could not be regarded as sane, that the monomania of his life had affected his reason, could have induced Frank to bear the burden which was put upon him as uncomplainingly even as he did.

"I meant to do great things when I came back to England," he said to Abigail. "In imagination I planted good seed enough to ensure a splendid crop; but first one green shoot and then another has been damped off, and there is nothing left for me to do but keep my temper with a most trying and wrong-headed old man. When I landed I was full of repentance, full of forgiveness, anxious to make amends; and the end of it all is I find my father does not care for my

repentance, or want my forgiveness, and only desires that I should help him to carry out some crazy scheme which can never do good to anyone."

Abigail did not answer for a moment. In her lover's new-found content that their engagement need no longer remain a secret he had failed to notice the great change that had taken place in her.

"What is the scheme?" she asked at length.

"So far as I can make out, to revive in our own persons the glories that once hung around the Briscos and Granthams."

"Oh!" said Abigail.

"Why should we trouble ourselves about a family-tree which has long cut off our branch?" went on Frank, "if we really ever were part of it. I do not like to tell my father so, but I certainly have no intention of devoting my life to grafting it on again."

"Why did you not let your father know, years ago, that you were living?" asked the girl, making no comment on this statement.

Frank took a few turns up and down the

room. "I always knew," he said, stopping suddenly, "that it would be hard to tell you about my past life."

"Don't tell me about your past life, then." The voice was the voice of Abigail, but the tone one to which he had till lately been unaccustomed.

"I must speak of it, if you are to understand why I kept silence so long. And at all events, I should have to make my confession before we marry."

Good or bad, Abigail uttered no word. She did not blush, she did not smile. She only went on with that eternal seam, into which she always appeared to be sewing a portion of her own existence.

"When I left home," Frank began—"as you now know I did leave home—I went straight to a certain Uncle Jack, of whom my old nurse had always spoken as but a little lower than the angels. He was going abroad the next day, and he took me with him, out of spite I am sure to my father, whom he hated. I had never liked my father, and I grew to hate him too. I looked upon him almost as my mother's

murderer; my nurse always represented him as such——"

"Was your mother's name 'Faith'?" asked Abigail.

" Yes."

"I see-go on."

"With my uncle I led what I thought at first a delightful life. He left me at liberty to do what I pleased. I had money always in my pocket. We went from place to place—he seemed to have friends in all towns, and his friends were good to me. After the strict discipline, the stinted food, the utter absence of amusement or even cheerfulness in my early home, you may judge how pleasant an existence of this sort seemed. I learned no lessons; I knew no restraint, and I grew up—"

Abigail raised her eyes and looked at him.

"I cannot tell exactly when or how it was that I began to doubt whether the life we were leading was all it should be. I remember one day at Baden, a kindly looking grey-haired gentleman, when leaving the Conversationshaus, happened to draw a letter

out with his handkerchief. He did not notice that it fell to the ground, but I did, and ran after him with it. He seemed pleased, and talked to me for a little, walking by my side.

"As we passed through the gates we met my uncle in company with a friend of his. He stopped, and would have spoken, but the gentleman only bowed stiffly and walked on, saying to me, 'Good-bye, my lad,' in a tone I could not then understand.

"'Old fool!' cried my uncle, looking after him. I could not tell you why that little scene impressed me so much. I never think of the roses and syringas of Baden, or in memory hear again the babble of its clear stream, but I seem to see the sadness in that old gentleman's eyes as he turned away. I wondered then why he would not stop to speak to my uncle, and why my uncle called him 'old fool.' I know now.

"We went from Baden to Homburg, and it was there we met a man who changed my life. He was a great favourite with my uncle and some other persons who were staying at the hotel. They always spoke of him as Charley. I had heard about him long before I saw him."

Frank stopped for a moment, then went on: "He was about the middle height, slight, languid, womanly looking, not much above thirty, with a saint-like expression, and the softest voice I ever heard."

Again Frank stopped.

"Appearances are deceitful. When I came to know more of him, I knew they did not lie who said he was the greatest drunkard, gambler, profligate in Europe.

"There was not much good in him. It was at his instigation I threw my first stake on a gaming-table: yet he nursed me through an attack of pleurisy, and remonstrated with my uncle about the way he was bringing me up. 'Poor little beggar, send him to school,' he said.

"'We'll do better than that,' cried my uncle, 'we'll make a man of him—won't we, Frank?' and then they all laughed, and like a simpleton, I said 'Yes,' and laughed too.

"My new friend took me in hand, however, and by fits and starts taught me pretty nearly all I know; sometimes talked to me about better things than dice and drink—made me think as I had never thought in my life before; and then we parted.

"I do not like to recall the time that elapsed before we met again. I was young in years, but I grew to be a man long before my time. I got to know my uncle to be devoid of honour, or even common honesty. He had runs of good luck, and then we feasted. He had runs of ill luck, and then, if he could not wheedle an innkeeper or swindle some one, we pretty nearly starved. I gambled on my own account, and, as fortune generally favours the young, was often successful. Then my money was taken from me, and after he had spent it, my uncle would sit and lament that he ever saw me, reproach me because I was my father's son, and speak of him in the vilest terms. At times like these I marvelled whether my father might not have been right in his estimate of his wife's family -nay, as I grew older I bethought me she might not have been exactly the wife for him "

Frank paused. Abigail's work had dropped into her lap, but she did not look up or speak.

The story was not what she had expected. Evidently it did not please her.

"We were rather in a 'tight place,'" went on the young man, "when we came across Scott—that was Charley's surname—again. He seemed to bring back luck with him. Once more gold chinked, and champagne foamed, and landlords were obsequious, and we seemed to have got the wind on our backs at last. This continued for some time. I used to go to the Kursaal as regularly as my elders. I was as confirmed a gambler as though I had been fifty. My uncle went away for a while suddenly, but that made no difference to me. I stopped on at the hotel with the rest, and lived, in all respects, very much as they did. You see I don't spare myself, Abigail; I told you I had been a 'bad boy.'"

"I remember," said she. Yes, she remembered well.

"One night luck went against me; I lost every sixpence I had gained, every sixpence I possessed. The same thing had happened to me before, and I did not fret much about it. Scott, on the contrary, rose a winner. I don't know how much he carried away, but something considerable. Letters awaited him at the hotel. He read them, and went to his room. I did not see him again till the next day. When we met it was late in the afternoon, and he was strolling through the gardens attached to the inn. 'Hi, Frank! I want to speak to you,' he cried.

"I went up to him, and he laid his hand on my shoulder.

"'You are going straight to the Devil, my lad,' he said. I thought at first he had been drinking, but he was quite sober, and very pale. 'I have made up my mind to save you, if you will be saved,' he proceeded. 'This is a letter to an old fellow who would like to serve me. I did him a good turn once—one of the few I ever did. I have told him you are a relation of mine, that your name is Francis Scott; that you have fallen among bad companions, and into evil courses, but that you want to reform. He will put you in the way of earning your bread honestly. Here is money enough to take you to him; now pack up your things and go.'

- "'Why should I go?' I asked.
- "'I have told you; because, if you are to escape the Devil, you must flee from him.'
- "I fell a-trembling; there was something in his manner more than in his words I could not understand.
 - "'But my uncle?' I managed to get out.
- "'You will never see him again,' he said. 'He has at last done that which will give him a home for life quite free from anxiety as to ways and means. You are well out of that connection—cut it—forget us all; there is not much to choose among the lot. Goodbye; if we ever meet, I shall have cast my skin, and become clean as a new-born babe. Till then, farewell. God be with you!"

Once more Frank paused.

- "Have you ever met again?" she asked. It was a woman's question, and a natural one, but she did not receive a direct answer. Instead, the young man resumed his narrative.
- "I went upstairs, and packed my few possessions. A vagabond life such as we had led does not tend to the purchase of useless trifles, and I owned as small a ward-

robe as it is possible to imagine. When I finished there were still a couple of hours to get through before the diligence left. The thought of the *Kursaal* came into my mind. We had always killed time there, always looked upon it as our home. I knew well enough Scott had not meant me to go there again, but what harm could there be in looking on, or even trying my own chance once more? I again counted the money he had given me. There was more than I should require for my journey, and——"

"You went to the Kursaal?" interrupted Abigail. It would be hard to say whether her tone was most full of contempt or pity. She was young—had she been older, pity might have predominated.

"I went," said Frank. "You see I am not glossing over my sin. My God! with such an end to my story, how could I?"

"You lost, I suppose, what Mr. Scott gave you?" suggested Abigail, in a judicial manner.

Again the young man refused her information, and proceeded with his narrative in his own fashion.

"When I got to the Kursaal, Scott was

already there, so absorbed in his game that at first he did not see me. I did not stake much at a time, but I continued staking till I had lost all I took into the accursed place. I had reserved money for my fare, except for that I was penniless! I walked out of the *Kursaal* too heavy at heart to hurl an imprecation at it, and strolled on some few steps with my hands in empty pockets. I had not gone far before some one touched my arm. It was Scott.

- "'So you could not refrain, my boy," he said with a ghastly smile, which will haunt me to my dying day. 'How do you feel now?'
- "I could not answer. I felt such an agony of shame that speech was denied me to express it.
 - "'Have you lost all?' he asked.
- "I told him it was not quite so bad as that.
- "'Thank Heaven!' he cried, 'you may be saved yet;' and then, like a person tired out, he sank on a bench—one of the many which lined the path.
 - "'I have no more money to give you,' he

said. 'I have been cleaned out; but you will leave here to-night, won't you?'

"I assured him I would.

"'Go on to the hotel,' was his last sentence; don't wait for me. I will sit here awhile. Good-bye—let this evening be a lesson to you.'

"He wrung my hand. I don't know what I said, but I know there were tears in my eyes when we parted.

"With a heavy heart I walked on-head bent down, heart full, as you may guess. He had been the one man I ever met who attracted and fascinated me, and I was going away in disgrace—condemned by my own act. It was a calm evening, calm and stillan evening when all nature seemed at peace. It was so still, one could hear a leaf dropping. Suddenly a pistol-shot rent the air. not know where the sound came from. I did not know why I looked round. People were running-but I ran fleeter than all. Without knowledge I seemed to grasp what had happened. On the bench as I had left him, with his saint-like face turned up to heaven, where God grant he found mercy, Charley Scott lay back dead. The battle had gone against him, as such battles always do, and——"

"Do not go on," said Abigail, and for a few minutes there ensued utter silence.

When Frank broke it, he took up the story of his life later on.

"I meant," he said, "to stop with the friend I had found till I made enough money to be able to say to my father, 'I want nothing from you'-but he died before I could put by much; and as it did not seem that in Germany I was likely greatly to improve my position, I resolved to come to London. I was poor enough then, and I did not feel inclined to present myself a pauper to a parent who had always prophesied I would come to no good. I heard he was badly off, and I sent him a few pounds I could ill spare, anonymously, giving him an address to which he could acknowledge that he had received the money safely. When I called to see if there were a letter, and found one waiting, I could not tell you what I felt. I opened it, and what do you suppose I found?"

"The money returned, no doubt."

[&]quot;'With G. Brisco's compliments, and begs

to inform his officious correspondent that he is not a beggar.' He could not know, of course, who had sent the order, but somehow it affected me like a slap in the face."

"But Frank, you can't blame him. I should not care to take money if I did not know where it came from, and perhaps not then."

"But you would refuse it civilly?"

"I might," said Abigail, but she said it doubtfully.

"At all events, that experience held me back. The whole thing was so like my father. Time and absence had somewhat softened my feeling towards him, and it was a shock to me to find time had not altered his character. Then I got acquainted with you. I tried to do so that I might learn more of him, and then—and then—you know the rest."

"No—I do not," said Abigail. "I cannot imagine why you refused to tell your father that you cared for me."

"Because I felt sure it would be worse than useless to tell him. I knew you were necessary to him. I knew his poverty was all a sham. From the time I learned the amount of rent he paid for this house and the money he must be clearing out of it, I felt pretty certain he was saving, and I thought it not improbable he might be saving for you."

"You must now be tolerably well satisfied that you were mistaken," said the girl drily.

"No; recent events do not prove that my former conjecture was wrong."

"And what is your present idea?" asked Abigail, laying her hand on the table, and looking up at Frank as she asked the question.

"I think I am not going to trouble myself much in forming any more conjectures on the subject. What I mean to do, is marry you as soon as possible; with my father's consent if he will give it, without it should he refuse."

"No," she declared, "no; I am very poor, but—" What she might have been going to add was interrupted by a tap at the door.

"Any admittance?" asked Mr. Katzen, coming in with outstretched hand and smiling face. "Strictly on business; ashamed to interrupt so pleasant a *tête-à-tête*, but Mr.

Brisco desires the presence of a certain young gentleman. I am so glad to make your acquaintance in a new character; I always felt you did not fit the old."

"Thank you," said Frank coldly; then turning to Abigail, added, "I shall see you again."

"Oh! yes, you will see her again," exclaimed Mr. Katzen, laughing. "Don't look so savage, dear boy; it is I, not you, who have the right to frown, yet I refrain from asserting it."

"If everyone prospered as you do, Mr. Katzen," remarked Frank, "there ought not to be much frowning in the world."

"And yet even I have my little cross. There she sits as demure as though she had never broken a heart—never split mine right in two. Ah! Abigail, cruel Abigail! But my friend Mr. Brisco waits, and I shrewdly suspect if you do not go to him, he will come to you."

"It is very probable," said Frank, and he sat down.

"If you are whistling for a storm, I think you will have one," observed Mr. Katzen.

"As your father has sent for you——" began Abigail.

"Believe me, you would do wisely to attend to his summons," added the Consul.

Reluctantly Frank rose and left the room. Mr. Katzen followed him with his eyes.

"It is a whole fortnight that I have not seen you," he said to the girl, when they were alone; "and so far as I can judge, much has happened in the time."

"But little has happened here," returned Abigail.

"The return of the prodigal—do you call that little?"

"The prodigal returned long ago."

"But 'incognito,' my dear. Unknown, a prodigal might just as well stay away."

"So he might," agreed Miss Weir.

"I long to hear all particulars. Did the father fall on his neck and weep?"

" No."

"At least he killed the fatted calf?"

" No."

"Perhaps it was best; for so small a household a whole calf would have left too much cold veal." "Far too much."

"That is right, sweet Abigail, laugh—it is long since I have seen you laugh. Great happiness has made you grave. Well, and when the repentant sinner revealed himself, were you very merry?"

"Certainly not merry."

"Sad, no doubt. We know you English do take your pleasure so. How pleased you must all have felt! Your gain, of course, is my loss; but there, no one can gain unless some one loses—'tis strange, but true. And in the son you can see the father's face, though I really think he is not so goodlooking as his dad. In an austere sort of way, Mr. Brisco, when young, must have been almost handsome. As yet, Frank the beloved is not handsome, but every eye makes its own beauty, and I doubt not our prodigal seems beautiful to you."

"Naturally," agreed Abigail.

"And though in feature he does not resemble his good papa, he is a facsimile of him in mind. As you so well understand the old man, you will have no trouble in fathoming the young one. How charming to repeat during the remaining term of your natural life the experience of the last—how many years? Secretive, self-contained, reserved, self-sufficient, Mr. Ralph Francis in his own person unites every quality calculated to ensure the happiness of domestic life. What a fortunate girl to have found such a lover!"

"What a fortunate girl to possess such a friend, rather!"

"I want to be your friend. I was a friend before I became your devoted lover; I would fain be a friend again, since you won't let me be your lover. And yet, after all, I think you had better reconsider matters. You would have a brighter and easier life with me than you will ever have with the son of G. Brisco. 'The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Of course it is not the child's fault that the father would eat that which he ought not, but I fear it will be your misfortune. Moreover, the papa does not wish the son to marry you, and——"

"How do you know that?" interrupted Abigail.

"I know it because the dear papa told me

so just now. His words are still warm in my ears. He said, 'Frank shall not marry Abigail—she is no fit wife for him.'"

With all her self-command, Abigail winced a little. She had known what was in Mr. Brisco's mind, but it seemed hard to hear it spoken.

"That seems strange if true," she replied, quoting Mr. Katzen's own words with a difference, "because Mr. Brisco refused to let me marry Frank."

"That was before Frank claimed to be his long-lost son. I am quite correct. My knowledge of your father-in-law who-is-not-to-be-with-his-good-will, may be regarded as exhaustive. To quote the excellent Jack Jeffley, 'I might have been down him with a light.' I have seen into all the dark corners; and to speak frankly, there is little else about him except dark corners containing nothing worth having. You have lived all this time in the same house with our grim friend upstairs, and fail to see that the twist in his mind is as easily followed as the twist in a corkscrew. Because after a fashion you belonged to him, you were too good for a

nameless stranger; when he found through the nameless stranger's veins his own blood was flowing—I speak metaphorically, because I believe his blood is only water—he at once found out Francis was too good for you. If you like to contradict my statement, do so, but the contradiction will not make the statement of less value."

"Was it to say all this you came here to-day?"

"All this and more. You do not know, but I do, that these people will stunt and kill that sweet young life. Better take your Karl, with whom you have laughed and been merry, than cast in your lot with a young prig who as he gets older will develop an even deeper depth of unsociableness than his darling papa. Fancy always being with the Briscos in life and in death!"

"Fancy always being with Mr. Karl Katzen—"

"Ah! that is better far to think of---"

"Who has already paid me a too lengthy visit-"

"And who will come again, charming Abigail."

"I fear so, but at least you will go now?"

"I will, inexorable one, and give you the chance of exchanging a few words with Ralph Francis. Adieu! May your thoughts be happy!"

"At least you can carry away the conviction that you have striven to make them so."

"I will not stay, lest you undo the effect of so amiable a speech. Farewell—farewell!"





CHAPTER VI.

A WEARY DAY.

IRECTLY the outer door slammed behind Mr. Katzen, Abigail pushed aside her work, folded her hands on the table, and began to think with all her might.

Hitherto, she had tried to thrust thought away, preferring to drift into a current she hoped might land her in a safe haven. But common-sense—a quality in which the girl was by no means deficient—never ceased whispering warnings in her ear; and now Mr. Katzen's remarks, which had burnt into her heart, said, as plainly as words could, that common-sense was right.

Whatever failings Mr. Katzen might possess—and Abigail was not likely to have

overlooked any of them — she knew his judgment as regarded other people could not be considered faulty.

For too many years she had been in the habit of hearing him sum up Mr. Brisco's tenants not to know he was rarely incorrect in his estimate of character, possibly for the very good reason that he saw defects much quicker than virtues. He did not err on the side of attributing too many good qualities to his fellows, and he was generally right in prophesying where they would fail.

Reluctantly Abigail had been forced to admit he was right even about herself. Little weaknesses—faults she indignantly repudiated—developed with the years, and cropped up at times when she least expected to see them. Why, therefore, should he not be right also about Mr. Brisco? Nay, she knew he was right.

She knew, for her intuition was quite as good as Mr. Katzen's analysis, that Mr. Brisco did not wish her to marry his son, and that while before Frank came home he would have been loth to part with so useful

a person as herself, he felt her presence now an anxiety and an affront.

As she sat, her mind was full of trouble. It did not regard the poor fare or the hard work, because it was true, as she always said, that Mr. Brisco had a right to do what he liked with his own—that he never bade her work, or demanded from her any return for the shelter he gave. More, she felt, with the full certainty born of experience, that there is a greater pleasure in giving than receiving. Her labour had been happiness. Even in secret, and without the slightest likelihood of being thanked, she had always loved to do something for Mr. Brisco. What then was the sorrow? This: disappointment, not so much to find herself unappreciated—though that knowledge did sting a little-but to discover there are some natures utterly unreceptive-natures on which it is as useless to lavish love as to pour water on a rock. So long as anyone is useful to them, they acknowledge the obligation after some fashion of their own; but the moment that usefulness ceases, the sooner the connection is severed the better. Such natures are often strong in

family affection merely because family affection in such cases is practically another form of affection for self.

Abigail did not put this into words, but the idea was tangible enough for all that. She had lavished a vast amount of gratitude on Mr. Brisco, but in a vague sort of way she understood now that gratitude ought to have been given for what he had done rather than for what he had felt.

It was not compassion which moved him the night he found her cold and starved, but first a wild idea the frightened creature might be his son, and next a sort of horror lest if he drove forth the outcast the cruelty would somehow be repaid to his own flesh and blood.

He had disliked her for the dreadful fancy suggested, but he could not refuse her shelter. That was all in the past; now he regarded her as a viper prepared to sting him. Since his son's return, he had changed towards her utterly. To his mind she was the third who spoils good company—an obstacle to be cleared away.

Abigail knew all this. She must have

been obtuse indeed had the fifteen days during which Mr. Brisco tried to prevent his son exchanging a word in private with her left any doubt as to his feelings. But though they hurt her, she did not think them unnatural. She had never forgotten her wretched past; no water, she believed, could wash away the stain she brought into the old house with her. The dreadful sights, the horrible sounds, the moral depravity amid which she had spent a time she could never forget, seemed branded upon her soul.

It was like a leprosy. To her imagination all men, if they chose to look, might see its ravages. There was a time when it lay as if dead; but from the hour when love quickened her soul, the memory of that old disease quickened too.

She had tried to ease the pain by confession, by confidence; but in the silence of night, in the noontide solitude when she plied her ceaseless needle, she turned sick to think she should always remember terrible scenes no decent child should behold; and at such times she murmured: "How can I

carry such dirt and grime across the threshold of my husband's house?"

For from the time when she gave her heart away, that grime seemed to cling to her more than ever. The picture of her mother as she saw her the last night they ever met would not fade away. A gin-palace in one of the lowest haunts of London, the lights blazing strong and fierce across the pavement; women who had drowned themselves in seas of drink till their faces were changed out of the semblance of humanity, gathered around the door, like corpses cast on the strand beside the great ocean of intemperance; on the threshold some one threatening, blaspheming, struggling with two policemen who dragged her away. A pleasant vision, a sweet domestic incident to prattle of to children playing around the hearth!

"Tell me a story about your mamma," she used often to hear little ones lisp.

Oh! what sweet, profitable stories she could tell her babes if ever she were a wife and a mother!

In that dark hour she conjured up the ghost of her own childhood till it appeared a

living presence. Could she wonder at Mr. Brisco, who knew *all*, refusing her to his son? Let Mr. Brisco be what he would—miser, pauper, misanthrope, monomaniac—he had kept himself honest and sober. Before no man need he lower his eyes with shame, and though his son might have gone far wrong, even he had turned back in time, and avoided open disgrace.

Sad—sad and weary was Abigail's strong heart as she sat wrestling with the sorrow of her life, facing the problem of what she ought to do with it for the future. Frank failed her; she could not think even of him with satisfaction. Secret—secret with her when she poured out the very agony of her soul in his ear. He ought to have told her his story then, as he ought to have revealed himself to his father long before. Was Mr. Katzen indeed right—was it a case of like parent, like child? Was it really a faithful presentment New Andalusia's Consul drew of her lover, or merely a cold photograph he had taken of his moral nature?

Abigail's was a healthy mind; it rose up now in arms against the vile caricature Mr. Katzen had presented as a likeness of her lover. What! after all this time should she begin to doubt him—to decide what he ought to have done—to sit in judgment on that which he had left undone?

Her head was still whirling a little with the pain of the blow knowledge of the past had dealt her. Till it ceased throbbing, she could not quite dovetail the Frank of Mr. Katzen's analysis into the Frank she loved.

There had always been hidden places about him, unexpected corners which had sometimes vexed—sometimes repelled her; but what was the use of perplexing herself about these matters now? She knew there was a work she alone could do, and in lieu of steadying her mind and considering how it was to be accomplished, she was wandering through mazes of psychological conjecture that could only lead to hopeless discomfiture.

"I cannot think about it any more at present," she at length decided.

The day had been marked by disappointment, as some days are. Being the last of the week, when the offices always closed early, and Mr. Brisco generally absented himself, to escape the sound of the usual cleaning, she hoped Frank would have gone with her for a walk, during which she had meant to tell him something of what was on her mind; but now, she felt very surely this could not be. No walks—no talks, for evermore, if Mr. Brisco were able to prevent them; and for one she had no intention of crossing his will. Yes, that was the end of her argument. She meant to help to destroy her own happiness—and yet not quite that.

If there were one thing in which Abigail believed more than another, which was peculiarly an essential part of her unspoken religion, it was, that so long as a person is trying to do right, that person cannot be quite unhappy.

Spite of the past, she had been happy; spite of the present, she believed she should be happy. Beyond the cloud she saw sunlight; after the night, morning must come. She did not know how, but it would be so. Hers was a child's faith, but it sufficed for her. In some way, in some place she would find everything, now shrouded in darkness,

made clear; the crooked straight; all wrong put right; all trouble changed to joy.

She had talked to herself about these matters in the former times while she sewed her seam and her canary sang; and though she might weary and fret for a while, the creed formulated then did not really fail her in her need.

"It is winter now—but it will soon be spring," she thought with a smile, sad though brave; and laying her work aside, she rose and left the room with the intention of going out for an hour.

Brooding had never been a practice of Mr. Katzen's "saucy lofe," and she did not mean to brood now.

At the top of the stairs she met Frank, closely followed by his father.

"Are you going so early?" she asked easily, as though no doubts were distracting her.

"No—I shall be back presently. Are you busy?" And the young man looked at her with imploring eyes.

She stole a glance past him at Mr. Brisco. His face had a hungry, eager expression; one hand was stretched out to touch Frank's arm.

Though she had never seen either before, she recognised both the gesture and the expression as those of a miser. In a moment the veil of years was drawn aside, and she beheld, not the rasping, grinding, conscientious poverty caused by necessity, but a devouring greed.

" I am rather busy," she said; and with a nod and smile flitted away.

Frank looked after the pleasant vision, and hesitated.

"What are you waiting for?" asked his father impatiently. "Let us be going."

They went down the oaken stair, their footsteps waking echoes that sounded all over the silent house. Abigail heard them go out by the main entrance; heard them descend the steps and cross the courtyard leading into Botolph Lane; then she slowly ascended to the roof, and opening the door, passed on to the leads.

She walked slowly up and down till the peace of the great city, which is like to no other peace on earth, entered into her soul and comforted it. There was no noise, no sound, save the muffled hum which is but

the life-throb of London's mighty heart. Millions of respirations join to produce one gigantic beat; yet the huge pulse throbs on steadily while men die, while children are born, while people marry and are given in marriage. Through tears, spite of laughter, no matter who may be sick or who sorry, who glad, who unrepentant, who filled with remorse—the leviathan never stops, but pauseless chronicles the moments as it moves forward to eternity.

It is wonderful, high above "earth's noisy clamour," to listen to this human hum—softer, yet more persistent, than the fret and buzz of insects on a summer day.

For years it had been a lullaby which soothed and calmed Abigail when her heart was hot and her soul sad. Even now she did not quite recognise the song it sung, though she was beginning to understand part of what it said to her. Listening to its mysterious melody, she forgot her own troubles—the ceaseless moaning lay held in its tone an anodyne as well as a rebuke for selfish sorrow.

It rose to her-this voice of the city-as

the voice of the world rises to the heavens. subdued and indistinct. She could not discriminate the sob of pain or the cry of joy. Where she stood all tones were blended into something too faint to be called a murmur, too persistent to be silence. It was too soft for the ear to acknowledge its sound; yet, had it ceased, the ear would have felt stunned at the absence of that for which it had learned to listen. What are the wounds of one, when the groans from some great battlefield are united together in one muffled chorus of agony! What are the sorrows of one weeping through the night, when through the night thousands are weeping too! What are the joys of a single life, when happy lives are counted by the million! What are the cares and crosses, the successes, the disappointments of any man's existence, when they come to be told in accents that lose all significance, because they are merged into a host of the same stories, in words that are lost as they rise, and seem nothing, when they reach the listener, but faint echoes of the chant which since the beginning of time has been ascending to God, who alone can distinguish the voice of each of His creatures, singing in the solemn oratorio such part of the great work as has been appointed to him!

Tower, spire, dome, red-tiled roofs, twisted chimneys, tapering masts—Abigail from her vantage-height looked over them all. They were massed together so closely, that a great portion of London seemed to lie within grasp. She looked till her eyes were dim with tears, looked till her heart grew soft with the memory of all the many days and nights when she had viewed these things, which it might be she would not view again from the same spot for ever.

She was making up her mind; she had almost resolved on her course of action. She owed three duties: to her lover, her benefactor, and herself; and the three were one. Her mental sight was growing clearer. If she respected herself—honoured even Abigail Weir, that poor waif who, in rags and hungry, had entered the old house—she need not fear for lover or benefactor.

It was right for her to go—right to put no division between father and son—right to

be a bone of contention, a cause of offence no longer. The way seemed too hard to set out upon at once; but it would be shown to her if it was the road she ought to take, and made easy for her feet to tread. The future looked dark and lonely, but light must come, and she was no stranger to loneliness. She had nothing to depend on but her own courage, no friend whose advice it would be good to ask in such a crisis. Two courses were open to her: she could marry Frank, and do wrong; or she could give up Frank, and do right.

She would give up Frank. How, or when, she did not exactly know—but she would give him up. She was not vexed with him now, or offended with his father.

As she walked backwards and forwards over the leads, she seemed to understand Mr. Brisco at last. To her he was a hero of romance no longer.

"Romance," she said to herself with wistful softness—for it seems sad to the young to have to abandon a dream or an idol—"dies with knowledge."

So long as Mr. Brisco had been a mystery

to her, she looked upon his faults as virtues; not an uncommon occurrence with any of us. Through the veil of the unknown she had peered at the events of his life clad in the glory with which imagination alone can invest them. She had exhausted herself in striving to form some theory that might fit in with facts she could not ignore; and now she was forced to content herself with reality, she could not quite cast down her idol to the ground.

After all, she only did what we most of us do. What are our dearest, nearest, most trusted human gods but gods of the heathen! We make them with our own hands—hew, them, fashion them, dower them, even clothe them in bright garments woven by our fancy; then, when the day comes that we find out what they really are, though we may mock our folly, we go on still loving the worthless idols, merely because we loved them once. For years Mr. Brisco had been as a god to Abigail; and when she knew he was no god, she could not turn from the old allegiance. Nay, as children clasp a doll the closer to their hearts because it is maimed and battered, so

she clung to that which had been a very religion with even greater tenacity than ever, though she knew it was powerless to save.

The old house—the thousand tender memories interwoven with it—the panelled diningroom, the marble-paved hall, the wide staircase, the little chamber she had called her own-she could never forget these things, or cast them out of her life; and so, though Mr. Brisco's past held no element of the greatness and grandeur wherewith she had clothed it, still the shreds of the mystic robe woven in her own fancy hung about him still. Love would not be worth much if it changed and faded as we grew in knowledge—if when the fruit of the tree of good and evil opened the eyes of our understandings, it altered the feelings of our hearts; and certainly, afar off, in a fashion all her own, Abigail had loved Mr. Brisco. Probably she was the one human being, besides his mother, who had ever really done so; and the return he made was perfectly natural—he longed to cast her off.

Next morning Frank came round in time for service, only to find that Abigail was already gone to church. "Which church?" he asked his father eagerly.

Mr. Brisco could not tell. Never a churchgoer himself, he yet proposed accompanying his son, say to St. Stephen's, Walbrook, which was very beautiful, as he had heard.

Frank made no objection. He was too sick at heart to object. After all, this was only what had been going on since the night he made himself known.

Well, it should end now: it should have ended before, had he known the manner in which his father would receive him. He had expected a different reception, but that accorded disorganized his plans. After all, nothing is harder to fight than affection, or even the semblance of it; and there was no semblance in this case. There could be no doubt that now his father clung to him as the last hope of a wasted and ruined life—only, why should he ruin his own life for a father who had never been dear to him? He would not do it. Abigail was first. If he had to choose, and he should have so to choose, Abigail must be the one considered.

"'A man shall leave his father and his

mother," quoted Frank, "and cleave to his wife."

He would cleave to Abigail. For his father's sake he had sought her first; but now he meant to stay with her for ever for her own. He would end this foolish interference; he would talk to his father; he would tell him what Abigail was in the present—remind him of what she had been since that blessed day when hungry, and cold, and ill, he took the child into the house, and so sheltered an angel unawares.

As he walked along, Frank could scarce refrain from speech then, so full was his heart of Abigail; but he crushed down the desire, and, meaning to have all out on the morrow, humoured his father to the top of his bent. For the last fortnight he had been a model son, but on that especial Sunday morning he eclipsed himself in amiability.

Meanwhile Abigail had gone to St. Maryat-Hill, the old church to which the Fellowship Porters were wont to repair, carrying nosegays of the fragrant flowers that were once deemed not too common for use and ornament. Perhaps she had some hope—or

fear—she should see her lover there. Women always feel, if they were men they would be so bold; and yet when true love ventures in, there is not much to choose between the sexes. If very much in earnest, men are as shy as women; they would, and they would not; they should like, but they dare not. Nothing on earth would have pleased Frank better than to be sitting with Abigail in one of the high pews; but he felt it better not to press the point, and therefore repaired to St. Stephen's, where Croly—Salathiel the Immortal Croly—even when old and stricken, used to ascend the pulpit, a stately figure.

There was no Croly in Frank's days—no one on that morning to tell people anything much to the purpose; but it did not matter to the young man. He was preaching to himself, and the burden of his sorrow chanced to be all about a new life and Abigail—a new life wherein he would be faithful to God, true to himself, good to the old man—his father, whose days had been "few and evil"—and devoted to Abigail. As she had been in the first head of his discourse, so she was a feature

in its conclusion; and while he was preaching about her to himself, she was striving to see the duty that lay to her hand, and wondering how she should best make Frank see that duty too. As she came out of church, exchanging greetings with those she knew, Mr. Katzen accosted her. He had entered quietly while the commandments were in progress, and modestly taken up a position as much out of sight as possible.

"I looked in at all the churches round and about here," he explained, "to find out in which you were praying, and also whether the devoted Frank happened to be in attendance. Where is he?"

"I have not seen him this morning," answered Abigail, turning in the direction of Tower Street, a manœuvre which was perfectly understood by Mr. Katzen.

"Fear not, my Abigail," he said; "your Karl has no desire to enter the old house, which is not to him any more what it was once. And so Frank missed you—shall we call it? Careless Frank! I would not have missed you; but it is too late to speak of that. Why I come to find you this morning

is, I have one word for your ear—something you ought to know."

"I do not want to know it."

"Soh—soh! then you shall not. Good-day, my dear. I have been at some trouble; but no matter—that signifies not at all——"

"What is it? If it is anything I ought to hear, tell it to me."

"Nay, nay; you are too imperative. I wish to do you a good turn, and you might at least be civil. Say 'if you please,' prettily, Abigail—no? ah! already the Brisco leaven is working. Well, let us go down here, and you shall be enlightened."

They turned into St. Dunstan's Hill, and walked under the shadow of the Lantern Church.

"These are the headquarters of our beloved Frank's employers," said Mr. Katzen, as his eye fell on Deedes' nameplate—"Fortunate Frank!"

"What have you to tell me, Mr. Katzen?"

"A simple thing. I do not think our Frank knows it; but I may tell you, if he plays his cards well, he will be rich some day."

- "No doubt; every man has his chance."
- "Ay, but everyone does not own a father who has eaten of the bread of affliction and drank waters of bitterness in order that he may save money. Mr. Brisco has saved money—much money. He can't take it with him to the next world, no matter to what part of it he may go. He has not anyone but Frank to inherit, and Frank will inherit, always supposing he behave himself."
 - "And supposing he misbehave himself?"
- "I do not know. But I should say the many thousands would go to endow a Brisco ward in some hospital, or launch many Brisco lifeboats, or build a Brisco almshouse. He might leave them to the Queen as a mark of Brisco loyalty, or to me as a token of friendship. Anyhow, he would not leave it to his son; therefore, use your influence to keep Frank on good terms with the charming old gentleman. That was the little word I sought you to say. I will now go to the west, though my love won't accompany me there—I wish she would. And you will repair to the old house, and find Frank not there. If you like, I will bet half-a-dozen

pairs of gloves against nothing that he partakes of mid-day dinner at the Jeffley mansion. It is roast-beef Sunday at Jeffley's—roast-beef, Yorkshire pudding, greens, potatoes, apple dumpling, cheese and celery; not so bad a meal for a hungry man, and Frank's appetite is, or used to be, excellent."

"When such fare awaits him at Mrs. Jeffley's, he would be foolish indeed to dine anywhere else."

"Perhaps——I can't answer for him. If you ask me back to the old house, I will answer for myself."

"It is not for me to ask, Mr. Katzen; and you know how likely Mr. Brisco is to invite anyone."

"I do. He is so hospitable. I must not detain you from his genial company. I feel how delightful it must be for you to talk Frank with him. But still, think of your Katzen sometimes. Adieu."

Scarcely conscious of what she did, Abigail stood for a moment looking after Mr. Katzen as he crossed the street and hastened up Mincing Lane; then she turned, and bent her lagging steps towards Thames Street.

She had no intention of going anywhere in particular, no wish to do anything save pass a little time ere retracing her way to Love Lane.

Leaving Thames Street, she went idly up Harp and Mark Lanes; then she dawdled for a while along Hart Street and Crutched Friars; then quickening her pace, for she knew she had some ground to cover, she walked through Jewry and Luke Streets, Bevis Mark, and Camomile Street, into Bishopsgate. Lonely and silent were the City pavements; the plague might have been raging for all the life that was abroad.

The vague unrest, the unreal melancholy, the luxurious sorrow of youth—things she had never before experienced—took possession of Abigail. Even the streets she knew so well seemed strange to her. Though she had no consciousness of change in herself, it was a new Abigail who walked through them—a girl no longer—a woman with a woman's fears, anxieties, responsibilities, thrust upon her all at once.

She had well-nigh made up her mind as to what she ought to do; but "I will not act

hastily," she decided, as she crossed Crosby Square on her way back. She was brave enough, yet the new sense of womanhood, still so young, warned her to take no rash step.

"That which I do now I can never undo," she kept repeating in a sort of mental argument all the way home.

Frank was not in the old house. She had scarcely expected to see him. Yet his absence, taken in connection with Mr. Katzen's sneer, affected her more than she would have liked to acknowledge.

As she and Mr. Brisco partook of their frugal meal, it was impossible for her to avoid thinking of the roast-beef and etceteras one long accustomed to the Fowkes' Buildings fare had mentioned as the certain meal awaiting her lover.

Everything is comparative. Mrs. Jeffley's carte might not have seemed appetizing to one accustomed to the best efforts of a French chef, but Abigail knew nothing save of the poorest living.

In her memory no decent joint of any sort had graced the board in Sir Christopher's old house; and, when contrasted with his usual food, what would their meagre dinners seem to a young man accustomed to a more liberal table?

Spite of all her sorrow, Abigail could scarcely refrain from smiling at the contrast. If she stayed in her present mind, it would soon to her be nothing, or less than nothing; but yet—but yet—how much it might have been!

They had finished dinner, yet Mr. Brisco did not leave the room. During the whole of her long experience such a thing had never before happened. Abigail attended to a few household matters, and waited.

She was not called upon to wait long. There came a ring at the front door which Mr. Brisco answered in person. When he came back, Frank came with him.

He was looking tired and harassed; not at all as a young man should have looked who had recently partaken of roast-beef and apple pudding.

"I am quite ready," said his father. "I think we are rather late."

"Are you not coming?" asked Frank, turning to Abigail.

- "Where?" asked his lady-love.
- "To St. Paul's—we are going to service there."
 - "Thank you, but I am far too busy."
 - "Busy-on Sunday?"
- "Indeed yes; you must excuse me; I have much to do. I am going out, for one thing——"
- "Yes, yes," testily interposed Mr. Brisco; "Abigail is always busy, and she goes out a great deal."
- "You might not suppose so, but I do go out a great deal," supplemented Abigail gravely. "Good-afternoon, Frank; I hope you will enjoy St. Paul's."

Spite of his father's presence, he followed her into the passage when she left the room.

"Abigail, why are you shunning me?" he cried, seizing her dress.

She turned back and smiled. "Don't talk nonsense, Frank," she said. "Go to St. Paul's with your father. You know he does not want me.".

- "You will manage, then, that we shall have some talk to-morrow, dear."
 - "We shall see-to-morrow," she answered,

and flitted up the stairs, not looking back even once over the balusters. She had made up her mind finally. She was going out—on an errand Frank little suspected.





CHAPTER VII.

A HARD DECISION.

Raven Court, just off Seething Lane, there lived the clerk of a neighbouring City church.

Abigail knew him and his wife well. They had known all about her for years—ever since, in fact, "the talk" in Love Lane about "that child" Mr. Brisco found in his cellar and declined to send to the workhouse. In her extremity it was to them Abigail decided to go. She knew she had but to say: "Mr. Brisco's son has returned, and I do not feel I ought to stay in the old house longer," and they would help her to the best of their ability.

It was a hard matter for her to speak of;

but she put it as well as she could; and the old lady, dressed out in her Sunday finery—black silk gown, lace collar, blonde cap trimmed with pale blue—"so tasteful"—broke out in a sort of elderly excitement:

"To be sure—to be sure! Though we are not placed as I should like in the way of suiting you, still, if you can make shift——"

"I can make shift," answered Abigail, with a half-smile.

"There is no one about here but knows that it will be a great change to you, and we must all try to make you as comfortable as possible. You are wise, my dear, not to go away from the people that know you; for you are too young and too pretty to be alone among strangers."

"I feel I am too young," answered the girl. "I have thought it all over, Mrs. Limber; and though I should have liked to go a long way off, I know it is best for me to stay here."

"Far best; and you shall be as private and snug here as you please. The only room I can give you is high up; but you will find the air better there, and the stairs won't be any trouble to you."

"No," said Abigail, "they will not be any trouble to me, and I shall like being high up."

"And whenever you feel dull you have but to come down to us. We will only be too proud of your company."

"You are very kind," answered the girl; "but I shall not be dull."

"Well, well, I hope not, my poor lamb! Rest your mind easy about the room. I'll have it all ready early to-morrow."

It was with a heavy heart that Abigail returned through the familiar streets. The step had seemed bad enough in prospect; but now it was taken her courage seemed to die out of her. A change!—ah! indeed it would be a change! Even the material differences previously overlooked now added to her misery. In lieu of space, and air, and liberty, to be confined to one poor room! To exchange the grandeur—fallen though it might be—of the old house for the mean habitation and the closeness of Black Raven Court; to have to look forward to spending

the best part of her life stitching in an upper chamber, with nothing beautiful to refresh her soul—all her surroundings poor, sordid, unlovely. Still she did not falter in her resolution, but held to it with the surest conviction that it was right, because she felt it such a bitter necessity. Never before—never—not even when she stole across it a cunning, feeble, frightened, desolate little stray, did the beautiful hall she would soon have to leave seem to her appreciative eyes so simple yet so grand as when she contrasted it with the lobby in Black Raven Court.

She could have kissed the marble squares, on each one of which fancy had engraven some sweet story of the happy past.

"Never again," she thought, "up such a staircase shall I pass. I must go back to something like what I came from—only I am not now ragged or starved, and I shall be with friends. Ah! my dear! luxury has spoiled you! Who are you to find fault with Mrs. Limber's little chamber on the wall—you who not so long ago were thankful to lay your head anywhere that you could compass peace!"

She did not go to church that evening. Frank vainly kept guard outside, hoping to waylay her. She never came. Again Mr. Brisco remained in the room after tea, to frustrate any interview which might have been arranged. Abigail sat in silence, reading till the letters danced before her eyes. Mr. Brisco had brought down an old volume, the leaves of which were stained and yellow with time, and sat reading too. Save the step of some passer-by, or the whoop of an irrepressible boy, not a sound broke the silence. It seemed to Abigail the quietest evening she had ever spent in that room-quieter even than when she sewed on hour after hour utterly alone.

At last she rose, and, after placing some slight refreshment on the table, said:

"If you do not mind I should like to go to my room. My head is aching."

Mr. Brisco looked up from his book.

"I do not mind," he said. "If you wish to go to bed, do so."

Abigail took her candle, and saying "Goodnight," turned to the door. On the threshold she paused. Her heart was very full; an

impulse almost irresistible urged her to speak. But one glance at Mr. Brisco checked her desire. His eyes were fastened on the oldworld volume. "Good-night," she repeated, with a wistful longing in her tone.

"Good-night," he again answered, this time without looking up.

"If he knew it was the last night, I wonder whether he would speak," thought the girl, slowly mounting the wide staircase she had so many thousand times flitted up lightly. She had some things to do ere she went to bed: to gather her few possessions together, and write a couple of letters—one to Frank, the other to his father. After she had finished her packing, she opened her blotting-case, and resting her aching head on both hands, considered what she should say.

It was the first time she had ever addressed Mr. Brisco in writing. At that moment, all which was strange in their enforced companionship seemed to stand out clear and distinct against the background of the past, and showed her how worse than foolish it would be to let her feelings run away with her pen.

She would say what she had to say in the fewest possible words.

"I am leaving your house," she wrote, without preamble of any kind, "because I feel it is best for me to go. Were I of any real use, or even pleasure, I would stay; but though you have not told me so, I know I am but an encumbrance and an annoyance, and it is only right for me to relieve you of the difficulty I am causing. Though you may not care for my thanks, I cannot help thanking you for all the years you have let me be happy here. I have arranged to stay with Mrs. Limber, in Black Raven Court, because I am afraid to go away among strangers, all by myself.

"ABIGAIL."

Her letter to Frank ran to greater length; but was scarcely more to the purpose:

"I will not stay to cause a division between your father and yourself," she said. "It is not that I do not care for you as much as ever; but nothing could induce me to marry you against your father's consent, and I feel sure he never will consent. I tell you my address that you may know I am safe. I should like you to write and tell me you have received this letter safely; but I am not going to correspond with you, and you must not come to see me. We were wrong before; we will be right now. We were only boy and girl then; we are man and woman now, and that makes all the difference. Those were pleasant pleasant days, when we did not give a thought to good and evil; but they could not last—they were too happy to last. O Frank! whatever comes, it will be always something to remember we were very, very happy then. Do not be unhappy about me. You know I can earn a living easily. Be good to your father; you cannot be too good, for you are all the world to him."

Not long letters, yet they took Abigail hours to write. Mr. Brisco, still with the suspicion strong in his mind that the lovers had arranged a meeting, crept up to Abigail's room to find out if the girl were there. For some time he heard her moving about. Then

he went—only to return almost immediately, to find utter silence. Her light was still burning, so she could not have gone to bed. He did not like to rap and remonstrate about the waste of candle, because Abigail, beyond a certain small amount, found the money for everything that was bought in the house. Again he stole away, and then, persuading himself she would burn the house down if left to her own devices, retraced his steps in order to point out the certain peril of keeping candles alight to such a late hour.

There was a sound in the room this time—the sound of bitter weeping. He did not stay to listen; he went downstairs with a feeling of indignation strong upon him.

"What! did she really expect me to give her my son—mine!" and he restlessly paced the room and then the hall. "That is what she is crying about, I suppose. I have been too lenient with her. I must end this folly at once."

It was folly—and yet—could this girl have done more for him had she been his daughter? What had he given her save shelter? What had she given him, always—— Conscience, that night, pricked Mr. Brisco sorely.

"But I was always just to her," he stood in the middle of the hall and protested. "She would have put by no money for herself, so year by year I set aside a sum I meant for her. And I have now invested that with my own moneys, and whatever be her share of the profits, she shall have just as though it were an inherited fortune."

For the fourth time he went upstairs and paused by Abigail's door. The light was extinguished. He could hear no weeping now—nothing but the occasional sob of one whose tears were well-nigh exhausted.

At breakfast next morning the silence of the previous night prevailed, intensified, if possible. Abigail could not—Mr. Brisco did not wish to speak. He had somewhat to say, but it was difficult to begin. On the whole, he felt he would rather open matters with his son than with the girl.

"I am going out for about half an hour," he said abruptly, as he was leaving the room.

"Very well," answered Abigail.

And that was how they parted.

When Mr. Brisco was gone she went upstairs and brought down her little box, which was light and easily carried. Then she laid the letter on Mr. Brisco's table and left the room, closing the door after her. She cast no lingering look around, paid no farewell visit to any apartment in the house. Soon the clerks would be coming and business beginning in the offices; but she would not be there any more.

She went to the top of the steps leading to Love Lane, and beckoned a lad who stood at the bottom.

"Is this all?" he asked, shouldering the box.

At the last, it seemed but the work of a moment. Without looking to the right or left, Abigail walked on, the lad before her. The old house was left behind. She had done that which she could not undo—which she would not have wished to undo if she could.

As she reached the top of Love Lane, and was turning along Great Tower Street, Mr. Fulmer overtook her.

"You are abroad early, Miss Weir," he vol. III.

said, raising his hat; and then, glancing at her box, "Going for a holiday?"

"Not much of a holiday," answered Abigail. Her heart was full, and he had taken her so much by surprise, that she could not in a moment bring either voice or manner to a proper pitch of cheerfulness.

"Dull weather, rather," observed Mr. Fulmer; "but we must be thankful it keeps fine." Which conversation having brought them to St. Dunstan's Hill, he again raised his hat and went to his office, leaving Abigail free to proceed to her destination.

That afternoon a gloom seemed to settle down upon the old house, such as had prevailed there before Abigail's appearance. There is something almost human about a house. In a few hours it can, without the smallest provocation, assume the unkempt and uncared-for appearance of the veriest slut. It can look miserable without reason, and cheerful without cause.

A few hours after the girl's departure, to Frank's mind the old house might have been preparing for the auctioneer's final visit; judging from appearances, he might have been awaiting the executioner. Directly he received Abigail's letter, which, as she had posted it, did not reach him till midday, he rushed round to Black Raven Court, where Mrs. Limber informed him Abigail was out. Even had she happened to be at home, he could not have seen her.

In removing to new quarters, Abigail had no intention of merely changing the venue. By crossing Tower Street she must still remain a bone of contention if she suffered Frank to cross the road after her. He knew she meant what she said, yet still he followed. In her heart she would have been sorry had he not done so. It was one thing to give up Frank, but quite another had she felt he could let her go without a struggle.

About four o'clock Mr. Fulmer came round to the old house. He had done so earlier in the day, during Frank's short absence.

"Any news?" he asked.

For answer, Frank, as customary, handed him the order-book.

"Not much doing," remarked Mr. Fulmer.

"No, sir." Frank's unwilling tongue had at length mastered the difficult words.

Mr. Fulmer drew a chair to the table and sat down. The gas had just been lighted, and the shadows seemed to be dancing over the dingy panels. Frank stood at his desk, making some entries in his cash-book. Mr. Fulmer took up a stick of sealing-wax, and began melting it.

"This is very good wax," he said. "Where do you get it?"

Frank told him.

"I wonder why we ever buy wax nowadays, when everybody uses adhesive envelopes?"

Frank could not tell him.

"So you have lost Miss Weir," observed Mr. Fulmer, dropping a large spot of wax on some paper, and sealing it with the office stamp.

Frank was too much surprised to answer. He certainly would not have included "Sir" in his reply if he had.

"She is a most sensible girl," said Mr. Fulmer. "She has done quite the right thing."

Still Frank did not speak.

"I think," went on Mr. Fulmer, "you will do well to talk to me about it. I am not your

enemy, though I know you have often considered me one; and I have a sort of interest in Miss Weir for the sake of old times."

"I was not aware that you had ever known her," said Frank, with a jealous ring in his voice which amused Mr. Fulmer.

"I was referring to Miss Weir's mother."

"What! did you know her?" said the young man; and in his astonishment he left the desk, and came to the table.

"Lord, yes!" answered Mr. Fulmer coolly, looking up at him. "Had not you better sit down? I knew her-let me see, how many years ago?-well, at any rate, when she was about four, and I perhaps six. I had tea in the nursery with her often. Mrs. Sandworth used to give us bread and jam, and the nurse was good enough to tie me up in a pinafore for fear I should spoil my clothes. The Dean was a wonderful old fellow—could pick up a living as a fowl does a grain of wheat. He was a pluralist, if you like—no wonder he waxed fat. Yes, Miss Olive made a nice mess of her life. You may fancy she had plenty of good chances, for she was the image of her daughter, and possessed every worldly advantage Miss Abigail has lacked."

"He wanted to marry the mother. I was right in my suspicion that he had a fancy for Abigail," thought Frank, whose jealousy of Mr. Fulmer amounted to a mania.

Mr. Fulmer looked at him, and smiled. He knew what was passing through the foolish lover's mind.

"Miss Sandworth had anything but a pleasant temper—yet we were always very good friends—perhaps because we never were anything more; and I was heartily sorry to hear of the match she made. I have watched the progress of your love affair with a great deal of interest, and wondered how it would end. I did not expect it to end as it has done, I confess; and I feel particularly pleased with Miss Abigail's sense and decision. I do not think I can help you in any way, because I really consider it is a marriage that had better never come off—but still you may as well talk to me about it."

"I do not want to talk about it," answered Frank sulkily.

"Just as you like, of course," said Mr.

Fulmer; "only let me give you one word of advice—don't try to persuade the girl to come back here. She has no fortune but her reputation—and that is one very easily lost."

"I have been as careful for her as her own father could have been," broke out Frank indignantly.

"Perhaps so. She has been very careful for herself, I know, and I have admired her for it. She is a very good young woman, and if you are ever fortunate enough to marry her she will make you a very good wife. By-the-bye, what has been the hitch? Why did you not marry her long ago? Come, you had better tell me. You cannot have many more mysteries in reserve after that thunder-stroke you dealt us of being Mr. Brisco's son—and I certainly have not treated you so badly, young man."

"What is it, sir, you want to know?—and I will try to tell you."

"I want to know all about you and your father. You will never be a successful man if you do not change your ways, and I never like a man to fail if I can help it. You either have some unhappiness which is interfering with your work and destroying your temper, or you have none. If you have none I should like you to look out another situation; if you have, be straightforward with me, and I will stand your friend."

Had anyone told Frank that morning he should ever come to like, or even believe in Mr. Fulmer, he would have laughed for scorn; and yet the miracle had come to pass.

"I will be straightforward, sir," he answered; "but I doubt my ability to make you understand. Even to one's self it is hard, at the end of a month, to give a sufficient reason for any action."

"Do your best," returned Mr. Fulmer.
"I have long ceased to expect impossibilities."

There was not much doing. Trade chanced to be somewhat dull, and for some inexplicable reason Deedes' had always, as Mr. Jeffley said, "found business slack" on Mondays. Accordingly, Frank was able to tell his story without frequent interruption. He kept back nothing, even to his belief that his father might, if he chose, live in a very different manner.

"He may even be well-to-do," he said. "I suspect he is."

"I know he is," replied Mr. Fulmer. "I know that he bought an estate in which a friend of mine was concerned—part of a large property belonging to the Granthams."

"Just what I suspected," said Frank.
"This is his latest craze—or rather the latest outcome of a craze he has had all his life.
The Briscos intermarried with the Granthams—at least, so he declares."

"Humph!" remarked Mr. Fulmer. "I wonder now why he mortgaged that purchase."

"Has he done so?"

"Yes—up to the hilt."

"To pay for it, probably."

"He had paid for it."

They sat silent for a minute; then Mr. Fulmer began:

"I see a disreputable little vagabond called Katzen here sometimes. Do you suppose your father is mixed up with him in any way?"

"No, I should not think my father was mixed up with anyone. Mr. Katzen comes here after Abigail."

"Oho! Sits the wind in that quarter?

Miss Abigail will have to mind what she is about!"

"You need not be afraid for her, sir," declared the proud lover. "She could go round the world alone, and come safe back."

"I think she could," agreed Mr. Fulmer, laughing. "She has often amused me. Now," he went on as he rose to leave, "you are to take your courage in your hand, and, whatever comes, be worthy of the girl you care for. You are to do your duty to your father; you are to do your duty by me; and you are not to be dangling about after Miss Weir. Leave her to do what she thinks right, and what is right—in peace."

He stretched out his hand, and gave Frank a hearty grip.

"You have strengthened me, sir, more than I can tell you," said the young man humbly.

"All right," answered Mr. Fulmer; and then he went away straight to Black Raven Court.

"I want to see a Miss Weir who is staying here," he told Mrs. Limber. "If you give her that card, she will know who I am."

And then, at Mrs. Limber's invitation, he walked into the old lady's own parlour, while she toiled upstairs to tell Abigail there was a gentleman—"such a fine man!"—come to see her!

"He would make two such as young Mr. Brisco, my dear. To be sure, I dare say he is nearly twice as old. And don't trouble your head about me. I'll just wait in the kitchen till he goes."

In the little parlour, which he seemed almost to fill, Abigail found Mr. Fulmer standing.

"No, thanks," he said, in answer to her offer of a chair. "I can't wait. I just called to know how you feel you will get on here, and to say if I can be of any service you must let me know. I and your mother were friends many a long year ago."

"My mother!" repeated Abigail, turning so sick and faint she had to lay her hand on the table to steady herself.

"Yes; we were children together. Perhaps," he added, "you can hardly imagine that I ever was a child. Of course I was very sorry to hear of her marriage——"

"She could not have married a better man than my father, Mr. Fulmer," interrupted Abigail.

"I feel sure of that, from what I have seen of his child," said Mr. Fulmer politely.

"I am afraid I was rude," said the girl apologetically; "but I thought perhaps you might not know."

"I do know," replied Mr. Fulmer; "and even for your dead father's sake I should like to help his child. How are you going to support yourself? Have you a sewing-machine?"

"No—and I do not want one," said Abigail. "There are not many people nowadays who can do plain needlework neatly; that is the reason I get so much to do, and am so well paid for it. I really do sew very well," she added, with a smile and a blush. "I am proud of my sewing, and thankful I can make enough money to maintain me."

"You really believe you can?"

"I know I can," corrected the girl. "I have certainly lost one good customer lately; but I shall soon find another to replace her."

"You are a true philosopher, Miss Weir,

and your last remark makes it easier for me to say what I want. My mother is always needing needlework done. May I tell her you would have time to undertake some of it?"

"I should be glad," answered Abigail; "only, perhaps the work which satisfies the people about here might not please your mother."

"I assure you she is not a difficult person to please," he said. "She will write to you herself. Good-evening. I am so glad to see you brave and hopeful."

And he passed into the hall, where he found Mrs. Limber's little servant, who "did for her" by the day, waiting to open the door for him, and drop a curtsey almost to the ground.





CHAPTER VIII.

MOTHER AND SON.

INNER was over in Hamilton Place. Mr. Fulmer had come up from his wine and his coffee to the drawing-room, where Lady Adela, his honoured mamma, was engaged in knitting a fleecy shawl.

No greater contrast can be imagined than that presented by Lady Adela to her son. Big, burly, powerful, he looked fit to slay an ox—slight, delicate, with silvery hair, and a white and pink Dresden shepherdess complexion, it seemed as though a mere breath could suffice to blow her away. She was a foolish and fussy little body. He owned the repose she lacked, and he lay back perfectly still in an easy-chair, with egs stretched out

and hands folded, watching the tiny lady—losing her wool and her needles, dropping her stitches, sipping her tea, nibbling a morsel of cake, and apostrophizing Fluff as an angel, a dear, a darling, and a precious. Fluff, wanting to go to sleep, did not respond to these endearments; she hated them, in fact, and Mr. Fulmer sympathized with her. During all the years he had been Lady Adela's grown-up son, he devoted himself to repressing her ladyship's exuberant affection all in vain;—to the mother, who could not realize that he was not still a child, he remained a lily, a rosebud, a pearl, a duck, and any other incongruous article that came into her head.

Hers was but a poor rag-bag of a brain, stuffed full with odds and ends of rubbish. A luckier woman never lived; the elder daughter of a poor earl, she married, when she had given up all hope of settling, a rich man who grudged her nothing for which she had a whim. She had children. The years flowed on free from trouble; and now, when she was getting quite old, she could still relish her dinner, and delight in Fluffy's beauty, and find pleasure in knitting shawls

and in reading letters from her many friends, filled with gossip concerning the sayings, doings and shortcomings of various acquaintances.

- "Are you not sitting too near the fire, George?" she asked, after a time.
 - "No," answered George.
 - "Your face is getting quite scorched."
 - "Let it," he answered.
 - "But, my sweet, it will make it so red."
 - "That is a matter of indifference to me."
- "What a strange child you are! Do, pray, move a little farther from the fire to oblige me."

The strange child pushed his chair back about an inch, and resumed his contemplation of the Dresden shepherdess. Really, she made a pretty picture with her snowy hair, and beautiful hands, and soft peach-like cheeks.

She had been a lovely young woman, and now she was a lovely old woman.

- "Mother, I want you to do something for me," said Mr. Fulmer, at length.
 - "Yes, mine own; what is it?"
 - "I want you to be kind to a girl."

"To a girl! How odd you are! What girl?"

"A very good girl—one who earns her own living."

"Oh, dear me! I don't know, my boy—I do not like that sort of thing!"

"What sort of thing?"

"Earning her own living! it sounds very dreadful."

"How would you have her live, then?" asked Mr. Fulmer.

"Ladies eat so little—she could live on almost nothing. Perhaps my ideas are oldfashioned; but still I do maintain that all this modern rush and hurry unsexes women. In my time, a girl would not have been thought respectable who did any one of the things I hear of girls doing now."

"My dear mother, do let us be rational. If no women worked, how should we fare without house and scullery maids, or even your grim and immaculate Tiffens?"

"Tiffens is a most superior person, George, and you should not scoff at her as you do. But does this girl belong to the class from which we get our servants?"

"Hardly; but she does needlework, and I want you to give her some."

"I fail to see how I can do that, my pet. Tiffens has a niece who sews beautifully."

Mr. Fulmer said something about Tiffens under his breath which was by no means complimentary.

"Now, my dear boy," remonstrated Lady Adela, "you shouldn't be naughty — you shouldn't really; and I cannot have you interesting yourself in a young needlewoman: for she is young, of course?"

" Yes."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Lady Adela; "I felt certain of it! I wish you wouldn't, George—I really do. I am sure if your poor father were alive he would not approve of your even speaking about such persons."

"I am sure he wouldn't care in the least. No father ever interfered less with a son than he did."

"He indulged you too much. I always told him he would regret it some day."

"Well, he certainly won't regret it now."

"My dearest son, you shouldn't — you really shouldn't."

- "Shouldn't what?"
- "Speak disrespectfully of the best of parents."
- "Indeed, I should be very sorry to do anything of the kind. My father was an excellent father. He fulfilled the first duty of a parent: he left me remarkably well off."
- "He did, remarkably; so why will you find fault with him?"
- "I have never even thought of finding fault with him. I want to talk of something quite different. This girl——"
- "Now, darling, don't, please; you know how it worries me to think and argue."
- "I do not wish you to argue or to think either: I only wish you to do. Look here, mother;" and, as he spoke, Mr. Fulmer rose and stood with his back to the fire—a mighty figure. "To cut the whole thing short, you must help her: I can't; and that's the mischief of it. Nobody but a woman can help a woman."
- "Really, Tiny, you are most inconsiderate," said Lady Adela. "You must be perfectly well aware that I have more on my mind already almost than I can bear, and yet

you ask me to help young girls who sew. Why should I, at my time of life, and in my feeble state of health, be asked to take up young persons of whom I know nothing?"

"You are not asked to take up young persons at all. I only ask you to give some needlework to a very plucky little girl."

"Where do you learn those dreadful expressions? As my brother so often says, if a gentleman must talk slang, he ought not to talk it in the presence of ladies."

"Never mind what your brother says now. Indeed, it is of very little consequence what he says at any time on any subject. This girl——"

"Georgy, love, I implore you not to tease me. I shall have to send for Dr. Bray if you do. I cannot—I positively cannot—have anything to do with this young person. Think how kind Lady Lifden was to that pretty Miss Hay, and——"

"If Miss Hay had set a-light to the house, and burnt that old Lifden witch in it, I for one should not have blamed her; and as regards the girl I am talking about, you will help her for two reasons: one, because I ask you"

(and Mr. Fulmer, stooping, kissed his mother's cheek); "and another, because she is the child of Olive Sandworth."

"Olive Sandworth! Do you mean Dean Sandworth's daughter, the girl you used to admire so much?"

"I don't remember admiring her, though she was the best partner at a ball I ever met"

"But she made some dreadful fiasco; ran away with a circus, and married a clown, if I recollect rightly."

"I don't think you are quite right in your recollection. She made a mess of her life somehow, I know. She is dead now, and this is her girl; and I want you to give her some stitching and hemming."

Lady Adela remained silent for a minute, during which she looked at her son, caressed Fluffy, fidgeted with her knitting-needles. Then she looked at her son again, and said with solemn impressiveness:

"I don't like this at all."

"Kindly explain, mother. What is it you do not like?"

"Your getting mixed up, my precious,

with such a set of people—girls who stitch and hem, and have mothers who ran away from home and broke their parents' hearts."

"Olive did not break old Sandworth's heart, at any rate—it was too tough."

"How can you talk in that shocking way!"

"Well, you know as well as I do, the Dean cared for nothing but his pride and his purse. If he had been anything of a Christian, he would have left some trifle to his granddaughter to ensure her against absolute want."

"Whatever he did, I am sure, was done from the highest principle; and now I want you to think of yourself. I can see plainly you are being drawn into some dreadful connection. You may laugh; but it is no laughing matter. Men are so foolish; their vanity does lead them constantly astray. I wish you would take warning. If you despise your mother's advice, do, my sweet, consult some one who possesses experience. Get Colonel Holtfel to tell you about that widow—"

"I have heard the whole story many times."

"Then why do not such stories teach you caution? If Colonel Holtfel's father had been less determined than he was, a most dreadful woman would have succeeded in marrying his eldest son."

"Well, mother," answered Mr. Fulmer, "it is useless to discuss the subject further. As you are determined not to do what I ask, I must get some one else to help me. Julia Maynce, I have no doubt, will be glad to do so."

It was a mean suggestion for Mr. Fulmer to make, since Mrs. Maynce was to Lady Adela the most frightful bugbear of all the numerous bugbears that had for many years troubled her maternal mind. Between this formidable person and Mr. Fulmer there had always existed a close friendship. As a girl, Lady Adela had feared Julia Chester was in love with her son; as a wife, she felt sure her son was in love with Julia Maynce; as a widow, she never knew an hour's peace, dreading that Julia would entrap her poor boy into a most unsuitable marriage.

To use the name of Julia Maynce as Mr. Fulmer had done, was to conjure up a

fearful danger, and on Lady Adela it produced a marvellous effect.

"Why should my pet go to Julia Maynce, when he has his mother? Who should so delight in pleasing you as I?"

"I should have thought no one," replied Mr. Fulmer; "that is why I came to you. But as you seem disinclined to do what I want, I think I cannot do better than try Julia. She has such a lot of children, she must be always employing needlewomen."

"But, my dear boy—now pray do not speak sharply to me—where did you meet Olive Sandworth's daughter? and how does it happen she needs work? I only wish to understand. When I understand, no doubt I shall be able to help you quite as well as Mrs. Maynce, though she has such a painfully large family."

"I have no objection, mother, to tell you all I know about Miss Weir; but I had better point out the fact that Julia would take the whole for granted. It may, therefore, perhaps save us both trouble if I go to her before entering into any explanation."

"Believe me, George, I do not ask for any

explanation. I think it is only natural that I should dread your contracting any unfortunate alliance. Of course it would be a matter of indifference to Mrs. Maynce whom you married."

"H—m, I am not quite so sure of that," said Mr. Fulmer diplomatically, too wise to lose the advantage he had gained.

"Tell me about this young lady—this—Miss—— I forget her name. Where did you meet her?"

"In your sense of the word I did not meet her anywhere. Some months ago we took a branch office in an old City house. It was there I happened to see her."

"How could you happen to see a young lady in your offices?"

"Very easily; but it was not in our office I saw her. The old gentleman who owns the house befriended her when she wanted a friend sorely; and she remained with him till recently."

"How very strange, my dearest!"

"Very—that Dean Sandworth's granddaughter should be literally saved from starvation by a person residing in the mansion where Sir Christopher Wren lived once."

- "Who is Sir Christopher Wren, love?"
- "A person who went up to the top of St. Paul's every day for two hundred a year."
 - "Oh! darling, you are jesting."
- "I am not; but we need not discuss him. You want to hear about Abigail Weir."
 - "What a dreadful name!"
- "It may be, but she is not a dreadful person. If you can imagine Olive Sandworth shorter and slighter, you may form a correct idea of her daughter."
 - "Good-looking, I conclude?"
- "That is a matter of opinion—peculiar-looking, certainly. The likeness to her mother is startling. When I first saw her coming down the staircase, I was so surprised I could not take my eyes off her. I had to apologize."
 - "Poor dear fellow!"
- "And then I made inquiries about her from one and another, and pieced up her history. A most gallant little girl. By Jove! if she'd been a man she might have done anything."

"George—George! you frighten me. I do wish your wise father was alive, to talk to you."

"So do I-but why especially now?"

"To warn you against such a connection, My darling, it would break my heart if you formed an unworthy attachment. You know how anxious I have always been to see you suitably settled."

"Yes, mother, I do know how anxious you have always been to see me married," said Mr. Fulmer, with grim irony.

"And if, after all my care, you were to choose a person of whom everyone belonging to you would be ashamed?"

"I have not the slightest intention at present of marrying anybody."

"Not-this-this-Abigail-"

"Mother, do you think I am mad? The girl is at least a quarter of a century my junior."

"That is nothing," whimpered Lady Adela.

"It is twenty-five years, anyhow. Further, she is engaged to be married."

"She could easily break that off."

"And moreover, if there were not another

woman in the world, I should not feel the slightest desire to marry her."

"Are you sure of that, sweetest? It would be such a comfort to me to feel satisfied you are in no danger of contracting a mésalliance. It would be so dreadful with your prospects—for, of course, though the title can never, I fear, come to you, the bulk of your uncle's property is at his disposal—and——"

"There could be nothing more natural than that he should disinherit his grandson in my favour."

"I have often thought so, but never liked to suggest the idea to him."

"Why not? The reasonableness of it must be so obvious that he could not possibly take offence."

"He is odd, you know. He might say you had money enough already."

"He has said so, and proposed I should lend him some. Another reason why he should make me his heir—I could clear all burdens off the old acres. But now about Miss Weir, whom I really am not going to marry. You will help me, won't you?"

"I don't know. I am afraid, dear child, I dare not promise too positively."

"Oh! very well!—then I must go to Julia."

"But, George, why should you? I am only too willing to do all I can. Tell me exactly what you want. I am sure if five pounds would be of use to Miss Weir——"

"It would be of great use if she worked for it—not otherwise—for she is a good, plucky girl, anxious to work, willing to accept payment for work, and capable of doing work for which payment can be given without any sacrifice on the part either of employer or employed. I only wish she was a man—I'd find her a berth to-morrow."

Lady Adela went on with her knitting for a few seconds. She knitted about a dozen stitches quite steadily; then she said:

"It seems to me Mrs. Moreton is the person who ought to do something for her."

"There is no doubt of that."

"She got all the Dean's money."

"So she did."

"Therefore, you see, precious one, if your young friend be really Olive Sandworth's

daughter she has really nothing to do but tell her aunt she stands in need of assistance."

"I have told Mrs. Moreton how the girl is situated, and she will give her no assistance whatever."

"I am not surprised. Mrs. Moreton was quite the most selfish woman I ever knew. All the Sandworths were selfish."

"If she could only see Miss Weir, however, I think she would relent."

"Then why does not Miss Weir go and see her?"

"She is not aware that such a person as Mrs. Moreton is in existence, and it might be a good work to bring them together. Mrs. Moreton would be much happier if she had any human being in whom she could take an interest."

"I am afraid she will never take an interest in anyone except herself."

"At all events, if you could only manage that she should see this girl, I think the interview might be productive of excellent results."

"My dearest George, it is impossible I can interfere in a purely family affair. As you

remember, I never had a very high opinion of any of the Sandworths, except the dear Dean. Mrs. Moreton was always far too pushing and self-seeking to accord with my ideas. The proper persons to arrange a reconciliation between her and Miss Weir are their solicitors. My brother always says, when you are in any doubt on any subject consult an honourable lawyer. The best advice you can give Miss Weir is to put all her concerns in the hands of some nice kind old gentleman like Mr. Brunt."

Mr. Fulmer looked at his mother in amazement. There is certainly no plumbing the folly of a fool. Yet, perhaps he was somewhat unreasonable in feeling exasperated with his mother because her silliness, aggravated by fear, was greater than he had conceived possible. After all, she only spoke according to her lights. She had no knowledge of anything except her own rank and the lower orders attached to her class: tradesmen, proud to "wait upon" her ladyship; servants, glad to get a good place and good wages, and willing to put up with some inconveniences for the sake of money and a liberal table.

And it was curious, that after so many years' experience of her powers of looking at everything through the small end of a telescope, her view of Miss Weir's position should strike her son dumb.

Nevertheless such was the case, and no speech could have served him to the same extent as silence did then. He resumed his chair, and taking up some periodical which lay to his hand, he feigned to be interested in its contents.

For a while Lady Adela knitted on, feeling that the wit and wisdom of many ages were centred in her own person; but at length she grew uneasy, and said:

"Why do not you speak, George?"

"Why should I speak, mother?" he answered.

Accident is oftener productive of more wonderful results than design. Had Mr. Fulmer flaunted Julia Maynce in her face then, Lady Adela would not have felt half so much alarmed as she did at her son's question.

"I should like to hear what you think of my suggestion." Mr. Fulmer laid down his magazine, and said:

"When a girl is working for her bread, it is not very likely she can employ a lawyer. However, do not let us talk about Miss Weir any more. I am only sorry I mentioned her at all."

"You know, dear child, I cannot bear to hear you speak in that tone; it is not right to consider this girl more than your mother."

"There is no question of considering any one more than you. I only want to help Miss Weir, and I mean to help her. Now pray let us drop the subject."

"How can I drop the subject, when it is alienating me from my own son?" asked Lady Adela, dropping her knitting and beginning to whimper. "I am always willing to do good to everyone. It was only to-day our vicar came and told me about a woman whose husband had deserted her, and I gave him a sovereign for her; and I told you I was quite willing to help this girl to the extent of five pounds, and it is impossible for any person to do more."

- "I wish you would not vex yourself," said Mr. Fulmer coldly.
- "You are very cruel, George. You ought to be more considerate; you know I only live to please you, and yet you are unjust, and talk as if I had offended you. But this is always the way—against my convictions you force me to do things your poor father would have been very angry if I had done. I cannot think it prudent, but I will tell Tiffens to look her out some work."
- "No, mother; you will not, if you please, tell Tiffens to look out any work whatever for Miss Weir. What I wanted was for you to be kind to the girl, and help her as only a woman can help a woman; but I have no wish to urge you against your convictions, and I will never in the future ask you to do anything for Olive's daughter."
 - "But you will ask some one else, love?"
 - "That is quite probable."
- "No, darling, you must not do so. It would look as if I were unwilling and unamiable. Come here, George—come over to your fond mother. Now tell me what I am to do; it is wrong and foolish of me, I

know, but I can't refuse my naughty pet anything."

This was generally the result of all discussion in the Fulmer mansion. If Mr. Fulmer set his mind to carry any point, he carried it; but such discussions were not frequent—for as a rule, he considered few games were worth the price of an argument with his mother.

"Now, darling," she said, "say exactly what I am to do, and then I cannot go wrong. Am I to ask this young person to luncheon? You know I shall be away for a short time—so it will be of no use my inviting her just yet."

"I do not wish you to invite her," was the reply. "I know she would not wish the relations between you and herself to be at all on a footing of intimacy. She will do your work, and you will pay her for doing it. Write her a little note, and say, in your nice gracious way, that on your return home you will appoint a day for her to call and see you. The same day I want you to get Mrs. Moreton here for luncheon—afternoon tea—anything. Manage to speak to the girl in

Mrs. Moreton's presence; treat her exactly as you would do any other young person earning her living in a similar way. Say nothing about her to Mrs. Moreton, unless she asks questions. She will guess who Miss Weir is the moment she looks in her face."

"I am afraid Mrs. Moreton will not much like to see Miss Weir treated like a seamstress."

"We cannot help that," answered Mr. Fulmer, with a smile. "Whilst she keeps Miss Weir out in the cold she cannot complain if other people do the same."

"That is very true; but she will not be pleased, I am quite certain."

"It is a matter of little importance whether she is pleased or not," replied Mr. Fulmer. "She is a most wrong-headed old lady."

"I never was fond of her," said his mother; "and though, dear boy, you often think me prejudiced, I know I have a most wonderful insight into character."

It was a month before Lady Adela found it possible to name a day when it would suit her to see Abigail. Over and over again Mr. Fulmer had to jog her memory, which, however, was not quite so treacherous as its owner affirmed.

At last, however, she and Tiffens managed to look out some fine needlework, with the execution of which Abigail was to be entrusted. "A present to my little grandchild," said her ladyship to the girl in gracious explanation; "and I know you will do it for me beautifully."

Abigail answered that it should be done as nicely as possible, and, accompanied to the outer door by Tiffens, who mentally wondered "What next, to be sure!" departed from out the splendour of Hamilton Place, scarcely remembering she had observed an elderly lady in the room where Mr. Fulmer's mother gave her audience—a widow of somewhat forbidding aspect, who during the whole of the interview seemed to be giving her undivided attention to the *Times*.

This was Mrs. Moreton, who asked no question about, and made no remark before, the girl.

"I hope," said Lady Adela to her son, "you will not ask me to invite Mrs. Moreton again when I am alone. Till to-day I never

quite realized that she is totally destitute of conversational ability. And I am sorry to say having her here served no good purpose. She could not even have noticed Miss Weir's likeness to Olive."

"She must be very stupid, then," remarked Mr. Fulmer.

"You have exactly expressed my idea, dear child. Mrs. Moreton is very stupid indeed—very stupid and tiresome."





CHAPTER IX.

THAT DEAR VICTOR.

O you have at last got rid of Miss

Abigail."

It afforded Mr. Katzen the purest pleasure to make this remark. He had been intensely annoyed by the course his "lofe" deemed it best to take, and he seized the first opportunity which came in his way for venting that annoyance on Mr. Brisco.

"It is rather Miss Abigail who has got rid of me," was the reply. "I knew nothing of her intention till after she was gone. She chose to go."

"I don't wonder at that. I don't wonder at that at all. The only marvel is she stopped so long."

- "No one asked her to stop."
- "And how do you feel now she is gone? I hear your son is living with you, and that Mrs. Jeffley has lost a lodger. I know he is lively company. He used to keep us all gay in the old time. I would have come round to see you, only he never cared for me so much as he ought."
 - "Perhaps you are mistaken, Mr. Katzen."
- "Ah! you play on my words, I see! What you mean is, he ought to care for me little. Is that not so?"
- "What I mean is that one cannot force liking, and my son does not like you."
- "I know—I know—and he does like the little sprite. Well, she has not removed herself very far away. It is not much farther from the old house to Black Raven Court than it used to be from Fowkes' Buildings to the old house. Under present arrangements they can see more of each other than they ever did. You were not wise, my friend, to let our young friend slip from under your control."

Mr. Brisco winced. Mr. Katzen had put into words the precise doubt which was continually troubling him.

"I never ought to have kept her in the house," he said. "I made a great mistake."

"A mistake, I fancy, that must have been good for you; but perhaps I err—no man can judge of another's business."

"I suppose that is the reason why no man can refrain from meddling in his neighbour's concerns."

"No doubt. People have always meddled—always will meddle. It is long since I have seen you. I wish I could think you looked well—but you do not; perhaps having your son at home is too great a happiness?"

"I have not as yet found that happiness a burden," said Mr. Brisco drily.

"Ah! you amuse yourself at me. Never mind, I am so glad we chanced to meet."

"So am I," answered Mr. Brisco, "for it saves me the trouble of going on to Mitre Court."

"You were going on there?"

"Yes. I wished to ask when you are likely to have those coupons?"

"Coupons—what coupons?"

"From your people—from New Andalusia."

- "Oh! I understand now. I don't know."
- "Are they not somewhat dilatory."
- "No—I think not. New Andalusia is a long way off; and time is not up, is it?"
- "Was the interest to be paid quarterly or half-yearly?"
 - "Not quarterly, certainly."
- "It is more than six months since the loan was closed."
- "Now you speak of the matter, I think it is."
- "And, you know, we ought to have heard something from your Government."
- "So we ought, if they mean to pay half-yearly."
- "But, my good sir, how can they mean to pay, if not half-yearly?"
 - "The interest was per annum, I think."
- "Yes, but it is absurd to suppose bondholders are going to wait a whole twelvemonth. I really cannot expect my friend to believe such rubbish as that."
- "Perhaps not; it does seem rather longwinded. Still, you must remember there always is delay about these things at the outset. The more bonâ fide an affair is, the

more likely to be a little irregularity concerning the preliminary arrangements. I have been much occupied; but I shall be writing to-morrow, and I won't forget to put the inquiry as to when we may expect to receive our dividends. They may be advised already, for what I know. Yes, when I consider, they may be advised any day."

"Still, it would be prudent to write. It is right the bondholders should be told exactly when they are to receive their interest. As you yourself said, it would not be wise to try to dispose of any of them till the coupons arrived."

"To be sure—so I did. No, no; it would be unwise. Bonds always sell better with dividend."

"I shall be anxious till we know something definite."

"Naturally—but all is definite. I quite understand that as you act for a friend, not for yourself, it makes you a little impatient; though when I come to consider the matter, I should say there would be no payment till June or the 1st July. Then everything would start fair."

- "June—why, that would be over nine months!"
- "Ah! no—not according to their calculation. There is a difference, you see, between paying and receiving. The payer is never in so great hurry as the receiver. And that reminds me. Did you see that letter in Monday's *Times*, from Basset the naturalist?"
 - " I did."
- "And that from the Marquis de Fontelle concerning the varieties of game to be found in New Andalusia?"
 - "I read them both."
- "Wonderful, weren't they? What a country it must be! If I weren't so tied here, I would go out there and settle. Perhaps I may, some day."
- "I hope you won't wait till then to ask about the interest."
- "You make fun of me. Well, I am enthusiastic, I admit; yet rest assured I will write, and should I know anything shortly, I will let you know at once. You never come round to Mitre Court. I wish you would. And do tell your son I owe him no malice for having cut me out with Miss Abigail.

Perhaps I may yet cut him out. At all events, we need not be bad friends over it. Do you happen to know anybody who wants to invest fifteen hundred pounds?"

"I do not," said Mr. Brisco decidedly.

."That is a pity—I could have put him up to a good thing. Oh! by-the-bye, I had forgotten—I must be off—I have not a minute to lose! Good-day, Mr. Brisco. Depend upon my letting you have the earliest intelligence."

With which assurance Mr. Katzen darted across the street, before Mr. Brisco could interpose a remark.

"That is Mr. Frank's doing," thought Mr. Katzen as he hurried away. But Mr. Katzen was wrong. Frank knew nothing of his father's concerns, and he was not likely to know much of them. The barriers of secrecy cannot be broken down in a moment, and Mr. Brisco had never yet even thought of breaking them down. The language of confidence is not one which can be learned after a man has passed middle life; and there seemed as little prospect that Mr. Brisco would speak unreservedly to anyone,

as that the sun would rise in the west. Conscience, however, makes cowards of us all; and Mr. Katzen, being conscious of a flaw in the New Andalusian business, felt assured that some one had been warning his old landlord there might be considerable delay in the receipt of those expected coupons.

"I wonder who will next begin to inquire," considered the Consul. "There may be some bad hours in store for thee, my dear Karl, when they all grow 'naturally anxious.' Before they do so, would it not be well to turn what thou hast into cash and go somewhere—not to New Andalusia? It might; but I think not. With all her many faults, England is the best place in which to make money or spend money—always supposing one can make enough or spend enough. Take courage, therefore! Fortune has favoured thee on occasion before—fortune may favour thee again."

It was a week later: a post for New Andalusia had gone out, and a post from New Andalusia come in, but still Mr. Katzen waited for tidings from "that land so blessed," in vain. The evening was thick and foggy;

something was falling in the City besides stocks and shares—something wet, though not exactly rain. Mr. Conrad Rothsattel told the Consul he might truthfully call it "liquid dirt," and the statement was more veracious than many he habitually made.

"But he lies not to me," said Mr. Katzen to Mr. Bernberg, on one occasion.

"If you are right," answered that gentleman, "it can be only on the 'honour among thieves' principle."

Mr. Katzen was writing, Mr. Conrad Rothsattel totting up a column of figures; and at the same moment Mr. Bernberg was walking along the greasy pavement, in order to see his good friend Karl, anathematizing the weather and the climate at every step.

"Ah!" exclaimed that gentleman, stretching out his hand, "but a sight of you seems good. It is a long time since you have come here."

"You may be very sure I shouldn't have come here on such an evening except on business."

"Business—and with me—better and better! Take a chair—that one is easy."

"Thank you, I don't care for easy-chairs,

especially in an office. I have come round to know when your people mean to pay the interest long overdue on that New Andalusian loan."

"Not overdue, Bernberg; nearly due, perhaps."

"We won't quarrel about a word. On what date are we to receive our interest?"

"I did not know you had any to receive. Are you a bondholder?"

"I hold bonds, anyhow, not of my own goodwill; and I want to know when we are to receive our interest."

"I do not know."

"You do not know? Then if you do not, who in Heaven's name does know?"

"I cannot say. I have written on the subject. A man asked me about the interest the other day, and I wrote by the next mail."

"Why did you not telegraph?"

Mr. Katzen shrugged his shoulders. "Telegraphing costs money," he remarked.

"Of course it does; we all know that. Tell me something new the next time."

"I am sorry I cannot oblige you. It is nothing new that I am unwilling to incur

expense which may not find its way back into mine own pocket."

"Do you mean to say that if you telegraphed asking what answer you are to give bondholders when they inquire about their overdue interest, they would refuse to allow you the amount?"

"Yes, that is what I mean to say."

"Well, I could not have believed such a thing possible."

"Why not? If you owed any one money, would you pay the expenses of his application?"

"I might have to do so, whether I would or not," was the answer. "But now tell me plainly, Katzen: what was the arrangement about these bonds? What dates were fixed for the payment of interest?"

"To the best of my belief and memory, no dates at all were mentioned. The interest was to be so much per annum. I do not know whether the ruling powers understood it was to be paid half-yearly."

"Now, attend to this, please. Of my own choice, I should never have had one of these confounded bonds in my possession; but I

was forced to take them and other things in satisfaction of a debt, or lose it. The other securities turn out to be of little value, and therefore I must get what I can out of New Andalusia."

"About which there can be no doubt; through which there can be no loss," interposed Mr. Katzen.

"I don't know; when a Government baits its loan-trap with a bonus of something like twenty per cent., cautious folks are apt to consider there may be danger in touching it; and the idea of danger is not likely to be dispelled when they find that after months have gone by, the question of interest is not even mentioned."

"Pooh!" exclaimed the Consul.

"I did not at first believe my debtor when he said he had received nothing—he wanted me to advance him the interest, as if, as I told him, I did not want every penny I could get for myself—but I made inquiries, and found what he said was right enough. Now I come to you for an explanation."

"How can I explain when I know nothing?"

- "According to your own statements, you knew everything when the loan was being floated."
- "Ah! when the loan was being floated; but I have had other things to think of since that."
- "I know you have. You have been putting your fingers in the fire and burning them."
- "Perhaps"—and Mr. Katzen looked his fingers over carefully one by one—"but they are well now," he added cheerfully.
- "They won't be well long; and you won't either, if I find there is any nonsense about these bonds."
 - "What sort of nonsense?"
- "Any juggling on the part of your Government."
- "Hey, hey!" said the Consul; "if you tap with your knuckles on an empty barrel, how it sounds! Don't look savage, Victor; frowns do not suit your style of beauty. New Andalusia is as honest as—what shall I say?—Victor Bernberg. She will pay all right—pay interest on every penny she has had!"

"That is all very well, but when?—at the Day of Judgment?"

"That depends on when the Day of Judgment comes. How droll you are, dear friend! Why do you fret yourself? New Andalusia can't run away. She does not want to run away. She won't be as the wicked Londoners by whom you have lost—a shameless bankrupt who, after taking your money, stands and laughs at you under the protection of the court. You will all get the full debt she owes."

"I'll take care I get mine, or I'll know some good reason why," answered Mr. Bernberg, looking moodily into the fire.

For a moment Mr. Katzen looked at him with the expression of a man who has it in his mind to make some remark. Then he thought better of it, and held his tongue.

"You will do well to put the matter strongly to your people," said Mr. Bernberg. "Tell them we do not like such loose ways of conducting business. Stay, I shall tell them so myself."

"That will be far the best. You can then put the matter as strongly as you like." "It is a very strange thing their Consul can give no information on so important an affair."

"You are in the mood to-night to think all things strange."

To this remark Mr. Bernberg, who was on his legs, vouchsafed no other reply than an interjection which sounded like "Hunh!"

"Take care of yourself," said Mr. Katzen, with cheerful politeness; but his words fell on empty air, Mr. Bernberg had banged the door and was gone.

Next day news was brought to Mitre Court that, in crossing the Poultry, Mr. Bernberg had slipped and fractured his leg in two places.

Great was the amazement and grief of Karl Katzen; many the lamentations he uttered; fervent the expressions of regret he poured into the ears of common acquaintances.

"Such a calamity! Such a catastrophe! He could not contain of himself with anxiety. He had sent to the hospital where Mr. Bernberg had been carried, and the report was very bad. Poor fellow! poor dear fellow!

But," he added to himself confidentially, "Providence knows best. It is bad on Victor, no doubt; but if I could, I would not interfere with the decrees of Providence for the world!"





CHAPTER X.

MRS. MORETON.

VER since that remote period when, securely tied up in a pinafore, he partook in the Deanery nursery of the Deanery preserves, Mr. Fulmer had been a favourite with Mrs. Moreton. She liked him in those days for two reasons—one, because he was a saucy, tricksome, independent, high-spirited young monkey; and the other, because he was the antithesis of his mother.

As time went on her liking deepened into friendship. A very strong-minded old lady, herself possessed of most decided opinions, with few of which he agreed, she loved to argue against what she considered the fatal liberality of his creeds—religious, political, and

social. Nevertheless she followed his advice as to investments, and consulted him about the prospects of many ventures in which she felt tempted to risk her money.

He erred on the side of over-caution, she declared; and it almost reconciled her to the loss of profit when she was able to tell him the shares of some company he had marked as doubtful were regarded by wiseacres with much favour.

She was constantly writing him little notes concerning this company or that mine, which perhaps were prompted quite as much by a desire to get Mr. Fulmer round to her house for a comfortable chat, as by any real need for information. After her visit to Lady Adela he had hoped to receive one of those notes; but when a fortnight passed and none arrived, he was forced to conclude his ruse a failure, and accordingly responded to Mrs. Moreton's next missive, which begged him to call about a matter in which he could help her, with a feeling of strong discouragement.

He had failed, and Mr. Fulmer did not like to fail. He had gone out of his way to try to serve Abigail, and Mrs. Moreton would not serve her. Altogether he repaired to Lowndes Square not in the best of tempers. When he arrived there, Mrs. Moreton did not receive him as usual with both hands outstretched; instead, she returned his greeting by shaking her finger at him and saying, "Naughty—naughty! I could not have believed, George, you would serve me such a trick."

"What have I done now?" asked George, whose spirits rose immediately under this reproach.

"Why, you can't deny, I am sure, that it was entirely at your instigation Olive's child appeared before me like a ghost from the dead."

"Oh! that is what you mean! Of course I planned the meeting, but I did not hear anything of your embracing and weeping over her."

"Most certainly not! am I a woman given to embracing and weeping?"

"You never have been, within my knowledge; but exceptions prove the rule. So you noticed the girl, though you made no sign. Like her mother, isn't she?" "Yes—with a difference. She has something in her face Olive never had; yet she does resemble her strongly. Considering the disadvantages with which she must have had to contend, her manners are not bad. I call them rather pretty."

"I am glad that you are pleased, for now my mother is able to consider Miss Weir's demeanour at her leisure, she has decided she is lacking in deference."

"Why should she be deferential, and to whom, I should be glad to know?"

"Well, I suppose the idea is, she ought to have been more respectful to my honoured parent. My mother says—and perhaps there is truth in what she says—that when young persons want work, they ought not to address those who are willing to give them work on a footing of perfect equality."

"Now Heaven grant me patience!" exclaimed Mrs. Moreton.

"I trust Heaven will be pleased to look upon your petition graciously," said Mr. Fulmer gravely.

"The girl could not have behaved better," went on Mrs. Moreton. "I thought her

manner admirable—as free from familiarity as servility. What can Lady Adela want?"

"It is impossible for me to guess. She says Miss Weir was too independent to suit her views. As I had not the pleasure of being present, I am unable to form a judgment."

"I repeat, George, the girl behaved admirably, under trying circumstances—most admirably!"

"Yes, I know—that is what you say; but then my mother tells me a different story. No two persons look at things with precisely the same eyes. But after all, what can it signify how Miss Weir behaved?"

"What a torment you are! I wish you were young enough for me to box your ears!"

"So do not I, for I remember your hand was not light; at any rate, as I am no longer young, forgive whatever I may have done to offend you, and say wherein I can be of use."

"I am going abroad."

"Abroad, eh!"

"Yes; and I have been thinking—now do not laugh at me——"

"Laugh—I see nothing to laugh at. You are going to waste your substance in foreign parts—going to leave me to mourn alone, and you talk about laughing!"

"I have been thinking," resumed Mrs. Moreton, "that as you say Olive's girl is a good girl—conversant with languages, and able to be useful—I might take her abroad with me, if she likes to go."

"She is a good useful girl, with a knowledge of French and German. Whether she would like to go abroad is quite another matter. In what capacity should you propose to take her?"

"As companion."

"This is a very sudden notion, is it not? When I spoke on this subject before you wouldn't listen to a word I had to say—snubbed me dreadfully, in fact."

"Because you wanted me to adopt her."

"So I did. It never entered my mind you would think of taking her for a companion."

"Do you see any objection?"

"If you intend to pay her, none whatever. I consider it an excellent idea: what Miss

Weir may think of it is of course a horse of a totally different colour."

"Do you suppose the arrangement would seem disagreeable to her?"

"I cannot form a conjecture; she is sensible, but you must remember she has always been accustomed to independence. No girl was ever so absolutely her own mistress as Miss Abigail Weir."

"She has only to refuse my offer if it be not acceptable."

"You may be certain she will refuse it in such case. Have you opened the subject to her?"

"No; that is what I want you to do."

"Me!-humph!"

"Are you unwilling? Remember, it is through you I know anything of her."

"I remember; I am not unwilling, but you must tell me exactly what I am to say."

"I have explained. What can you want more?"

"I want to hear the footing upon which you want her to stand. Is she to be companion, or niece, or friend, or a mixture of all three?"

- "Scarcely the last. But she is my niece, and must be recognised as a relative. If I take her, it will be entirely on your recommendation. But for that, I should fear to have her mother's daughter under my roof."
- "I fancy you will have no repetition of her mother's folly. But would it not be better for you to say all these things to her viva voce? Suppose I break the ice, and arrange an interview; I could then gracefully retire into the background and leave you to conclude matters in your own admirable fashion. After all, I think you and she may stable your steeds well enough together."
- "Remember she need entertain no absurd notion of having my money."
- "An interview with you would suffice to dispel any notion of the sort; besides, I know she has never entertained the slightest expectation of money from her mother's family. All she wants is work; whether she will relish the kind of work you are willing to provide seems to me problematical."
- "At all events, will you broach the subject?"

"Yes, I will open the pleadings."

In compliance with which promise Mr. Fulmer next morning repaired to Black Raven Court.

Once again Mrs. Limber's parlour was placed at his disposal, and once again Abigail descended from her room, somewhat curious to know what could have brought him to her dingy lodging for the second time.

"Perhaps her ladyship wants to see me," she thought, "though it did not seem as if I had impressed her very favourably. Possibly she has liked my work better than she liked me." And so she tripped down trim and bright as ever, but looking, as Mr. Fulmer saw at the first glance, somewhat bleached and worn. Against the closeness of those narrow lodgings, the difference in her daily life, not even her splendid health and excess of vitality could make a quite successful fight.

"Well, and how are you?" asked Mr. Fulmer. "Yes, I will sit down, thank you, this morning, for I want to have a talk with you. I have been meddling in your business, and if you give me no thanks for my officiousness,

I hope you will at least believe I was actuated solely by a desire to serve you."

"I am sure of that," said the girl. "Have you been trying to get me some more work?" she added, with a smile.

"It has resolved itself into work," he answered; and then he told her plainly what he had asked Mrs. Moreton to do, and how she had refused to listen to him, and that which she now offered.

In perfect silence the girl listened to the end. She never interrupted him by a word till he had finished his story and wound up by saying tentatively: "At least, it might be wise for you to see her."

Then Abigail answered: "Yes, I will go to see her; I will go this morning."

"Do you think that would be quite prudent?" asked Mr. Fulmer, rather staggered by such an excess of promptitude.

"You are afraid it would look as if I were too eager for the post," she said, putting into words the precise thought which had passed through his mind; "but I cannot even begin to consider the proposal till I hear from Mrs. Moreton exactly what she proposes. I should like to travel. I should be thankful to leave here, but I can say nothing till I have been to Lowndes Square. Yes. If you please, Mr. Fulmer, it will be better for me to go there at once."

"Upon my word I agree with you!" declared that gentleman.

"And whether I accept Mrs. Moreton's offer or not, you must believe I am most grateful to you for your kindness."

"Kindness!—nonsense! Only wish I could do something worth talking about. Knew your mother, you remember; spent many a pleasant day at the Deanery. Now let me give you one word of advice as regards Mrs. Moreton—begin with her as you mean to go on. If you don't, you will not be allowed to say your soul is your own."

" Is she that sort of person?"

"She is that sort of person."

"The prospect is not enticing," said Abigail, laughing, and then Mr. Fulmer laughed too.

"Her bark is worse than her bite though," he remarked; "a great deal worse. She has been going to bite me to the bone often, but always relented. I prophesy that you will get on together."

"Perhaps," answered Abigail. "At all events, if I go to her, I will go with the intention of trying to please her."

"Then you will be sure to succeed," answered Mr. Fulmer. "You are a wonderfully sensible young lady, Miss Weir; it is quite a pleasure to have anything to do with you."

Even this compliment could not quite reconcile Abigail to the idea of encountering her unknown relative. It seemed like essaying a new life for the second time; but she felt it was a chance offered of which it would be well to avail herself if she could. She had grown weary, most weary, of Black Raven Court, of the narrow house, of the kindly but unwelcome familiarity of her hostess, who could not conceive but that at all times and under all circumstances her conversation must be agreeable. Further, though she did not write to Frank, Frank persisted in writing to her; and though it was scarce in flesh and blood to leave her lover's letters unread, she felt she was not keeping to her resolution in holding any communication with the old house. Yes; it was better she should go. She had wished to go; and now this opportunity had come, as if by a miracle, she meant to go if possible.

Yet it was taking a great step — a momentous step; and as she remembered it would remove her far away from Botolph Lane, her hands trembled so much that she could scarcely tie her bonnet-strings.

She made as careful a toilette as she could, took one last look in the poor little mirror which hung over her washstand, threw one swift glance around the mean room where she had fought her brave fight in silence, and then went swiftly down the stairs and out into the court. It was like leaving the old house again, only that she knew even better now what facing the world alone meant.

On the way to Lowndes Square she bethought herself that it might be well to prepare a note which she could send up to Mrs. Moreton in place of a card; and accordingly, after leaving the omnibus, she went into a shop and wrote a few lines, commencing "Madam," and ending with "Yours truly." "She shan't say I presume on our relationship," thought the waif.

Mrs. Moreton was at luncheon when she received this note, which surprised her as much as Abigail's promptitude had astonished Mr. Fulmer.

"Ask the young lady in—here," she said; and the next moment the young woman and the old were face to face.

"You can go, Figgins," observed Mrs. Moreton to the butler; "I will ring when I want you." Then, as the door closed, she turned again towards her visitor with the words—"So you are Abigail Weir!"

"Yes, I am Abigail," was the answer; and there ensued a pause, during which grandaunt and grand-niece seemed to be measuring each other.

At last Mrs. Moreton spoke, "Mr. Fulmer has told you that I wish you to come to me?"

"Yes; but I scarcely understand. I did not know——"

"Why do you stop, child—why do you not say plainly you wanted to see what sort of person it was who made such a proposal?"

"It was so entirely unexpected," hesitated Abigail, routed for the moment by a candour exceeding her own; "when I rose this morning I had never heard your name."

"Did your mother not speak to you about me?"

"My mother scarcely spoke to me at all. When she did, it was not about her relations."

"She was very cruel to you, I believe?"

Abigail did not answer. She had nursed this grief in secret, and it seemed hard to have her bantling dragged out into the full light of day.

"Olive was always cruel—always," went on Mrs. Moreton. "I remember her when quite a tiny creature—Won't you have something to eat?—help yourself to a cutlet."

"I am not hungry, thank you," said Abigail, who indeed felt as if she were choking.

"Would you mind giving me the claret? Thank you; you do not take wine? That is right, I never like to see girls take wine, though they all do nowadays."

There ensued a short silence, then Mrs.

Moreton asked suddenly: "Well, what doyou say to my proposal?"

"I do not know," answered Abigail. "I might not suit you, and——"

"I might not suit you," finished Mrs. Moreton.

"I did not mean that exactly. I was going to say that I should not like to come and perhaps have to leave immediately."

"Perhaps you would rather not come at all. If so, pray make no scruple about mentioning your wishes."

"I think you scarcely understand," said Abigail. "I have not a home to which I could return if you were dissatisfied with me. I am earning a living now, but if I gave up my work I might not immediately be able to get any again. I should like to try what you offer, but I feel a little afraid. Besides," she added, getting more courageous at the sound of her own voice, "I do not even know what a companion is expected to do."

"I will not ask you to wash and comb my lapdog, because I don't keep a lapdog; or to let the parrot bite you, because I would not have a parrot in the house; or read me

to sleep, because I always do my reading for myself: but I dare say I shall ask you to do things just as silly and unreasonable, and I should not like you to refuse my requests because you thought yourself too high and mighty to comply with them."

"I should not do that, I think," said Abigail, even while it occurred to her that Mrs. Moreton's requests might often assume the character of commands, and might not be always easy to comply with.

"And I want no fussing over me, or affectation of fondness."

"If you could see Mr. Brisco, you would understand that after living with him I am unlikely to offend in those respects," answered the girl drily.

"I shall require you to do exactly as you are told, and I expect absolute truthfulness."

"I think I may say I am truthful," answered Abigail; "being so, I am afraid I could not promise to do everything you may tell me, but I would try."

"And I allow no lovers—no Mr. Katzens, no young Mr. Briscos."

- "Even if I wished to see either, no lover is likely to follow me across the Channel."
- "I am not at all sure of that; however, they must abstain from coming to see you in my house. Broadly speaking, I think I have now indicated all the points necessary for me to mention."
- "There are two things I should like to say, if you allow me."
 - "Say what you please."
- "I should like you kindly to tell me the amount of salary you would be willing to pay me."
- "You should have your board, washing, lodging, and travelling expenses free."
- "I am afraid I could not manage without a salary of some sort. My wardrobe is not very extensive, and——"
 - "I will buy your dress-"
- "Thank you," said Abigail very decidedly, "but I prefer to buy my clothes for myself. Ever since I have had anything beyond mere covering, I have earned the money myself, bought the materials myself, and made them up myself."

Mrs. Moreton looked at the girl. "This

is Abigail," she thought; "the former demure little miss was a counterfeit."

"Not a bad idea," she said aloud; "but if you come to me I hope you won't consider it quite necessary to carry out the last part of the programme. I have no fancy for seeing my carpets littered with cuttings and ends of cotton."

"I beg your pardon," answered Abigail.
"In such a house as this I should not, of course, think of making my own dresses. I have lived in a very humble way, and like it; but I can understand and respect the wishes of those who live differently."

"I must trouble you to ring," said Mrs. Moreton; and then there ensued a pause while Figgins removed the dishes.

"Have some jelly, Abigail," hospitably entreated his mistress, after the butler had proffered tart and cream in vain.

"No, thank you," replied Abigail; "I have lunched."

"Then, if you will take nothing, let us go upstairs," she said, passing her hand through Abigail's arm, and thus they proceeded to the drawing-room.

"Now I may tell you what I am willing to

give," said Mrs. Moreton, just inside the door. "I suppose it is a great deal more than you are worth——"

"Then I hope you will not give it," interposed Abigail promptly.

"You will have to learn not to interrupt," remarked Mrs. Moreton. "I am not unreasonable; I admit there are two sides to all questions, and we are bound to look at both, though of course only one can be right. On this occasion I think your view is the right one. I had not considered that you would lose your connection if you came to me, but if we arrange to stop together for six months certain——"

"Yes," said Abigail.

"And I promise to give you fifty pounds at the end of the six months, would such an arrangement satisfy you?"

"It is too much," declared Abigail simply. "I could not make half that amount in the time. Say twenty-five, because I must buy some dresses——"

"I will give you fifty, and find money for some dresses—which you shall buy for yourself," added Mrs. Moreton, with a laugh. "And now is there anything more you wish to say?"

"Yes—is my mother likely to find out where I am? It seems dreadful to say, but I have lived in horror of her for years;" and Abigail's face paled. Her mother had been the haunting terror of her life.

For a moment Mrs. Moreton stood silent—stood with her face averted, her jewelled fingers laid on Abigail's wrist.

"You do not know, then," she said at last; "you have not heard?"

"I have heard nothing fresh-"

"Not that your mother is dead?"

The clock ticked on the mantelshelf, the embers dropped on the hearth; just for about the space one could have counted thirty no other sound broke the stillness. Then, with a gasping sigh, the girl woke from her reverie, and said:

- "How did she die?"
- "Better not ask; much better."
- "How did she die?" repeated Abigail.
- "I must know how she died."
- "In a hospital, from the effects of an accident."

- "What accident? and in which hospital?"
- "I had been making her an allowance," said Mrs. Moreton. "One day, when she went to the solicitor's to get it, she was very——"
 - "Yes; I know——"
- "As she was in the act of crossing Holborn she fell, and an omnibus passed over her. They took her to Bartholomew's. I paid the expenses of her funeral. If you like to go into black you may."





CHAPTER XI.

THE BUBBLE BURSTS.

Raven Court had been vacant for months. Mrs. Jeffley seemed no nearer coming to terms with her landlord than ever. Frank, in Love Lane, was bearing the burden of an uncongenial life as well as he could, while his father continued to plod on much as of yore, when one morning Mr. Bernberg made his way up the staircase in Mitre Court with the aid of two sticks, and curses enough, had curses availed, to lay London in ruins.

Hearing the unusual noise, for which his previous experiences of Mitre Court in no way served to account, Mr. Rothsattel went out on to the landing, where, seeing who the visitor was, he ran down a few steps and courteously offered his assistance.

Mr. Bernberg, however, acknowledged his politeness with no answer, good or bad, but continued laboriously making his way upwards, garnishing the stairs with a plentiful supply of groans and expletives. Arrived at the top, he made no inquiry whatever for Mr. Katzen, but continued his progress across the outer office to the inner door, which was flung wide as he approached.

"What the devil does this row mean?" Mr. Katzen was in the act of saying, when his eye fell on Mr. Bernberg.

"My dear fellow!" he exclaimed, "is it you? How glad, how very glad, I am to see you."

Again Mr. Bernberg vouchsafed no reply, but pushed into his friend's office, and, seating himself on the arm of that easy-chair, the comfortable depths of which he had declined to explore on the occasion of his previous visit, took out a handkerchief, wiped his forehead with a groan, and then glared at Mr. Katzen.

"I am afraid you don't feel very well," said that gentleman sympathetically.

"I have come for my money," answered Mr. Bernberg, quite ignoring the Consul's expression of solicitude.

"What money?" asked Mr. Katzen innocently.

"The money I advanced on those rotten bonds. I understand the whole dodge now, and if you do not make the matter square for me, I will make matters hot for you."

"I am placed at a disadvantage," observed Mr. Katzen, addressing his audience, which chanced only to consist of Mr. Rothsattel, who, perched on a high stool in the outer office, was listening with all his ears to the dialogue going on behind him: "a lame man comes to insult me, and I am so polite I can neither kick him downstairs nor ask him to go away till he has rested himself."

"Is that your answer to me?" asked the lame man.

"You can take it for an answer if you like."

Mr. Bernberg clutched his sticks again, and with difficulty got on his legs.

- "Look here, Katzen," he said: "if I go, I won't come back again."
- "Now do not say that!" entreated the Consul jeeringly.
- "So I will give you another chance. Upon my soul, you had better pay me that money!"
 - "Why should I pay it?"
- "You know the why even better than I do."
- "It is no use making a row about the matter here; you must apply to New Andalusia."
 - "I have applied to New Andalusia."
 - "Then you had better apply again."
- "No; it is to you I come for my money, and it is from you I mean to get it."
 - "Very well."
- "If you do not settle with me at once, you will find it very ill."
- "My good friend, you are feverish and fractious; go home and send for your doctor to give you a composing draught. Health is more than much money; a quiet mind is better than many bonds."

With an oath Mr. Bernberg turned upon the Consul.

"Keep your axioms for your own benefit; you will require all the comfort you can get out of them if I do not hear something satisfactory from you before two o'clock this day. I give you till two, but not a minute longer."

"So friendly of you, dear Victor. Goodbye; take more care of yourself than you did after your last visit. Rothsattel, help Mr. Bernberg into the court, and get him a cab. No? well, don't swear; let us be moral if we cannot be wise. Pray don't fall downstairs—au vevoir!"

And then he and Mr. Rothsattel stood waiting for the crash both fully expected.

"He is out too soon," said Mr. Katzen to his satellite, when he found the crash did not come. "I am afraid he will throw himself hack "

And having uttered this remark in a tone of much concern, Mr. Katzen returned to his own office.

About an hour later he was again disturbed by a very sleek, very soft-voiced individual, who begged for five minutes-"Only five minutes, I assure you. A busy VOL. III.

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man myself, I know the value of time to a busy man"—and so, Mr. Rothsattel being absent, bowed himself into the inner office.

"My name is Slim," he said; "you do not know me, I think, but I know you by reputation. I am a friend of Mr. Bernberg's, and he has told me how matters stand between you. Naturally a round peg, Fate has thought fit to put me in a square hole—where I rattle, positively rattle. Being a lawyer, I ought not to be here at all, but I love peace more than any Quaker, and I said to Bernberg, 'Now, why should you and Mr. Katzen quarrel? man in a most delicate and responsible position, why should you try to ruin him? Why not let him make some proposition? you know whatever he says he will stick to. Let me walk round and see I feel confident the matter can be arranged without unpleasantness. Extreme measures are always to be avoided.' So here I am, Mr. Katzen, ready to hear the reasonable suggestion I am sure you have to make."

"It is extraordinarily friendly of you, Mr. Slim, to put yourself to so much trouble,

which I the more regret as I have no suggestion to make."

- "Oh, come now! and you and Bernberg such old allies. You must try to do something, you really must. You know he has advanced a lot of money on those bonds."
 - "I cannot help that."
- "Quite so; but you can help him to get his money back again. He made his advances relying on the solvency and good faith of New Andalusia, and now, I am sorry to say, New Andalusia repudiates the whole affair."
 - "Again, I cannot help that."
- "But, my dear sir, you must help it; we have no one to look to but you, and we do look to you, and we shall look to you."
- "I am afraid I must say for the third time, 'I cannot help that.'"
- "But you must help it; you will not let your poor friend lose his money and risk a most disagreeable exposure yourself for the sake of a few pounds. To you the pounds must seem very few. Be reasonable, Mr. Katzen; write me a little cheque. See, I do

not even ask for costs; I give you my time and trouble cheerfully; anything to avoid litigation. Here is a pen; hand me an order for the amount—I have put it down with nominal interest, only four per cent.; and I pledge you my word of honour the whole matter shall rest sacredly among the three of us, and never be mentioned to the outside world."

Mr. Katzen accepted the proffered pen, and, twirling it about in his fingers, looked up in Mr. Slim's face and smiled.

"You must think me a great fool," he observed.

"A fool!" repeated Mr. Slim; "anything but a fool. Believe me, as I said to Bernberg——"

"Never mind what you said to Bernberg," interrupted Mr. Katzen, "but attend to me. I am not going to pay you one farthing of the money you claim from me, whether principal or interest."

"You have not considered; you do not know where this matter will end."

"Do you?" asked Mr. Katzen.

"Yes; if you persist in refusing an amicable

settlement, unfortunately I know what my duty will be."

"Then go and perform it," advised the Consul.

"I regret exceedingly——' began Mr. Slim.

"There is nothing you need regret on my account," said Mr. Katzen.

"You will then really allow me to go?"

"As you force the confession, with the greatest pleasure."

After which explicit statement Mr. Slim felt he had no alternative save to leave the office, very slowly and with a truly sorrowful expression of countenance.

"I wonder what the end of it will be!" meditated Mr. Katzen, holding the pen Mr. Slim had picked up between him and the light, as if it could answer the question. He did not know then—he had never even in fancy preshadowed the results which ensued. Speaking in the after-years concerning the great swindle that must for ever cause the name of New Andalusia to stink in the nostrils of those who subscribed to the loan, Mr. Katzen declared: "From first to last I

was carried forward by the force of an irresistible current. Not born great, I had yet greatness thrust upon me. I had no more desire for notoriety than New Andalusia-yet we both compassed fame! Accident and not design shapes our destinies. We are all but poor bunglers when we place our best contrivances beside the work of Fate. Ah! how grand she is! How she brings order out of chaos, and extracts fortune from materials whence we could only eliminate failure. The longer I live, the more satisfied I feel we are only blind workers in the dark. All we can do is to labour our best, and leave the outcome to a Power of which we know nothing and never can know anything."

Those who had the pleasure of intimate acquaintance with Mr. Slim and his client might have been satisfied neither of them would bring matters to an extremity till both threats and blandishments were exhausted.

More than once—many times, in fact—did the lawyer repair to Mitre Court. "So reluctant am I," he said, "to do that which cannot be undone."

"Give me the name of your solicitor," he

urged; "if he is a practical man we shall be able to come to some mutually satisfactory arrangement that will avoid exposure and avert disastrous consequences."

"I will give you the name of my solicitor when I see fit," answered Mr. Katzen, "and not till then. Meantime, leave me alone, if you please. I have my business to attend to, and do not wish to be troubled about yours."

This sort of thing went on for so long, that perhaps at last he did feel a faint surprise at being haled up to the Mansion House—there to answer for having obtained money under false pretences.

Mr. Slim stated the case against Mr. Katzen; and a Mr. Minter, who said his client (who courted the fullest investigation) had a complete answer to the charge—which had been preferred merely in the hope of securing a bad debt which Mr. Katzen most properly refused to pay—offered bail to any amount.

This application was scornfully rejected by the sitting alderman, who happened to be chairman of a company which had for its raison d'être the manufacture of Fibre from Bulrushes. The charge, he declared, involved issues of such magnitude and interests of such importance that he could not feel justified in accepting bail. He said he would remand the prisoner—which he did. He must refuse bail—which also he did. Mr. Minter bowed to his decision, which it was impossible for him to avoid doing; and Mr. Katzen was removed to quarters where he had ample leisure for considering the fresh phase on which the New Andalusian Loan had entered.

That afternoon all the bills of the evening papers, stuck about with stones over the City pavements, bore this announcement:

"New Andalusian Loan.
Extraordinary Revelations.—The Consulcharged with Fraud."

One of Mrs. Jeffley's lodgers was the first to bring the news to Fowkes' Buildings, and if a bomb had exploded in that narrow court it could scarcely have caused greater excitement. Each inmate of the house went or sent out for a paper. Mrs. Childs (in imperfect boots) scudded around the neighbourhood in search of the latest printed intelligence.

"Lor," she said to one newsvendor, "who'd ever a thought it—a little scrub like him! He might well afford to have his office furnished like a palace, when he was robbing the widow and the orphan the way he did."

All the persons in Fowkes' Buildings who had felt a grudge against Mr. Katzen—all who had ever felt envious of him—all who had disliked him—all who had mistrusted him, now said their say—except Jack. Jack laid the paper out on the table and read the whole evidence carefully. His wife came into the room, but read no paper—reading was not much in Mrs. Jeffley's way. She had heard the news and various comments on it, and came into Jack's parlour, as it seemed to her husband, scared and white and in search of rest.

"Cheer up, old woman!" he said. "I never did think much of Katzen, as you know; but I don't believe all this. Some enemy is at the bottom of the affair. Don't be fretting, Polly. I'll try and see him to-

morrow. Poor fellow! even a sight of me might hearten him up a bit. Why, wife——"

For she had taken his hand, and was kissing it.

"You are so good," she said in explanation; "there never was anybody so good as you!"

"Now, little woman, let's have no more of that," entreated Jack, "I'm not good. As for Katzen, I'd be brute beast or a foreigner if I didn't feel for him now. Look at the years we've known him! Lord bless us, in a manner of speaking he is one of the family, and if he wants help, or a friend to speak for him, he shan't be at a loss—there—there—there!"

And Jack stroked the divine Maria's hair, and patted her shoulder, striving in his divine trust to reconcile his wife to the affliction of the man he had always disliked.

"Katzen will pull through all right, never fear. He's got his head screwed on the right way, and Mr. Minter is one of the very sharpest out-and-outers in London. Bless you, he has it all as he likes in the courts. Now lie down and have forty winks, and you'll be fresh as a daisy, and ready to enjoy a mouthful of supper by-and-by."

"I will lie down. It has given me such a turn."

And, with hand pressed to her forehead, Mrs. Jeffley left the room.

Jack filled a fresh pipe, and smoked it while he again read the short statement, which was all even the latest evening paper could give.

"It's rummy," said poor honest homely Jack, laying down the sheet; "I'm afraid it's very, very rummy. I wonder if Scott has heard the news. I'll stroll round and tell him."

And accordingly, thrusting the *Echo* in his pocket, he made his way to the old house.

- "Have you heard about Katzen?" he began, as soon as Frank opened the door.
 - "What about him?"
- "Well, they do say he has bagged the whole of the New Andalusian Loan."
 - "Whew!" cried Abigail's lover.
 - "They've had him up at the Mansion

House, and refused bail; and upon my conscience, Frank, the more I look at the whole business the uglier it seems. I know I shan't be able to sleep a wink to-night. It is un-Christian to consider that a man you've eaten and drunk with is in gaol. I can't overget it at all, and as for the wife, she is fairly broken-hearted. Here's the paper; what is your opinion of the matter?"

"I am glad I am not in Mr. Katzen's shoes," answered Frank, after he had glanced over the paragraph, handing back the paper.

"Keep it, keep it, we've a dozen or more at home; perhaps your father may like to look at it. There would be no good in trying to see Katzen to-night, but I will in the morning. He may want a friend now, if he never wanted one before."

"If this is proved, what will he get?" asked Frank.

"I don't know; a smartish term, you may be sure."

"I'll try to get round to the Mansion House, anyhow," said Frank.

"So will I," capped Jack. "Your father will be a good bit surprised, I fancy."

If Mr. Brisco were surprised he concealed the emotion admirably. He was rather more snappish to his son than usual, and insisted peremptorily on all lights being extinguished even sooner than was the general practice; but he made no comment on Frank's tidings, and showed no interest in the newspaper account when he heard it read aloud.

That night Frank could not sleep. He lay tossing from side to side for hours, and at last got up and looked out on St. Botolph's old graveyard, and the trees which, bathed in moonlight, swayed gently in the light breeze. He stood at the window a long time, thinking of his own past life, of his father, of Abigail, of Mr. Katzen, of the unsatisfactory present, of the uncertain future. A great unrest was upon him; though he could not distinguish their sound, the coming footsteps of some strange change were echoing in his ears; more, he fancied he heard faint noises in the old house, the shadowy tread of those who had once dwelt

there, but now were dust; muffled sighs that had been breathed years and years before; the stealthy whisper of laments poured out on the silence of night by overburdened hearts which would never beat again.

"I can't stand this," he thought; "I must go down and get a book."

And he passed into the corridor, where he was met with a rush of cold fresh air that swept through and filled the house as though every window in it were open.

The young man could not understand, and paused for a moment perplexed. Still the rush of cool night air, blowing, he felt, down upon his head. He knew now whence it came; he ran up the narrow staircase which led to the roof. The door stood wide open, with a great patch of moonlight streaming through.

In a moment he was standing on the leads, looking at what seemed to him the strangest sight he ever beheld.

High above the sea of roofs, high above spire and tower, London's tall bully was reflected clear and distinct against the sky, dwarfing the proportions of all things in its neighbourhood, yet forming an appropriate centre round which they could cluster.

It was a magic scene: overhead a brilliant moon sailed westward, below lay the sleeping city, chained in silence, bound and hushed in rest.

The flat roof gleamed like silver in that marvellous light, and close by the further end stood, absolutely still, Mr. Brisco, his grey hair stirred by the light wind, his dressing-gown hanging loosely around his tall, spare figure. This was what Abigail had seen so often. Yet at the sight Frank's heart seemed to cease beating. The weirdness of the surroundings, his father's peril, there being but a foot between him and the unprotected edge, something in the loneliness of that silent figure which had kept so many solitary vigils, awoke for the first time feelings of intense compassion in the young man's mind

He seemed to see the desolation of a human soul—desolate whether by choice or circumstances affected the question not at all —a soul cut off from human interests, human hope, human pleasure; a soul born, after a fashion, deaf and dumb and blind, that had ideas to which it could not give expression, that could not win love, yet remained wretched for want of it.

He stepped out to the verge of the flat roof and got between his father and danger.

"Come," he said, remembering Abigail's formula; "the night air is keen, and you are not wise to brave it. Come," and he led his father downstairs.

When they met next morning at breakfast neither referred to their meeting under the moonlight.

Frank, sick and anxious, scarcely tasted food, and Mr. Brisco rose from table after swallowing one cup of tea.

"I shall not be back till evening, probably," he said, and left the house.

Frank only waited till one of his principals arrived, and then he went straight off to the Mansion House.

The Court was crammed; with difficulty he got standing room. Business was only just beginning; a few charges had first to be disposed of; then Mr. Katzen was brought up.

"Takes it cool, don't he?" Frank heard one man say to another, but he could not see the consul's face. Mr. Jeffley, seated in a further corner together with his father, and Mr. Bernberg, and a host of persons whose faces were familiar to him. As he stood on tip-toe to look around he heard some one speaking. It was Mr. Minter addressing the Lord Mayor, who sat instead of the gentleman connected with the Bulrush Fibre Company. He began by complaining of the treatment to which his client had been subjected. Why, because a person who lent money at a rate per cent. which Mr. Minter felt himself incompetent to reckon without the aid of a professional accountant, chose to accept bonds which at a moment's notice he could not convert into hard cash, a gentleman who chanced to be merely an agent in the affair was to be seized and victimized, he, Mr. Minter, professed himself quite unable to tell. On the previous day (instructed so hastily as he had been) he did not grasp the facts of the case. He knew them now, and claimed to have his client discharged at once.

Mr. Katzen agreed to give so many bonds vol. III. 58

in consideration of so much money. He had fulfilled his agreement. He was not answerable for any delay or irregularity. He had given the bonds. Could Mr. Slim, or Mr. Anybody Else acting on behalf of his client, say Mr. Katzen had not done all he agreed and was bound to do? He, Mr Minter, thought he might say without fear of contradiction this was one of the most infamous cases ever brought into a court of law. Fraudulent pretence indeed! So far from Mr. Katzen having been guilty of obtaining money by misrepresentation, it was Mr. Bernberg who had endeavoured, unsuccessfully, he, Mr. Minter, rejoiced to say, to extort money by the most shameful intimidation. For weeks he had been pursuing his scandalous tactics, and it was only when he found Mr. Katzen remained absolutely indifferent to his threats that he resorted to the desperate expedient of endeavouring to convert a court of justice into an office for the collection of debts. 'I thank God, however,' Mr. Minter declared, 'though Justice is commonly represented with a bandage over her eyes, she was not to be led blindfolded into such a trap as this.'

The matter was one which never ought to have been brought before his Lordship, but as it had been brought, he hoped he would mark his sense of the nature of the course taken. So far from Mr. Katzen being conscious of wrong, he had never till the previous day consulted a solicitor concerning the charges made against him. Strong in his innocence, he walked calmly forward, unmindful of and indifferent to the menaces of a man who once professed to be his friend. Because New Andalusia chose to repudiate her liabilities, was a gentleman to be dragged out of his office and placed at the bar like a common felon? If such things were to be permitted, who would be safe?—not Rothschild or Baring, or any great financier-not the Bank of England itself. He, Mr. Minter, had no more to say. His lordship, than whom no man had a larger or wider experience of business, would not, Mr. Minter felt certain, allow his own court to be used for purposes of extortion.

His lordship did know a great deal of business, having made all his money in trade; yet, strange to say, the case did not look to him exactly as it did to Mr. Minter. He had his doubts about the Consul, and though he knew, as regarded the character of prosecutor and accused, it was much "six of one and half a dozen of the other," he did not feel disposed to dismiss the matter after the summary fashion Mr. Minter indicated. On the other hand, he did not see how he could keep Mr. Katzen in durance vile. What Mr. Minter said was perfectly true. Legally, the Consul had done no wrong. Supposing even that he had appropriated the money-no creditor could touch him criminally —it would be a question for another tribunal to decide whether he could be touched at all. It was not the first time Mr. Slim was clearly wrong-for the fiftieth time Mr. Minter was as clearly right. His certainly was a view which would not have occurred to everybody. Now it had been advanced, however, there was no gainsaying it. Therefore, the Lord Mayor stated he had nothing to do except with the purely legal question. Whether or not the Consul for New Andalusia had acted fairly or unfairly by those he represented was quite outside the matter before him-as regarded that, he could not and did

not desire to express an opinion. Nothing as yet had been submitted to him which justified an arrest for false representation. The prisoner would therefore be discharged.

"Without a stain on his character, my lord," unwisely adventured Mr. Minter, generally astute enough to leave well alone.

"I have nothing to do with that," said the Lord Mayor; "I can only deal with the matter before me."

It was neither guilty nor not guilty—and those who had trusted New Andalusia and New Andalusia's Consul were free to make what they could out of the decision.

"Very fishy, I call it," said Mr. Jeffley, as he and Frank walked along King William Street together. "I was sorry for him last night, but I am not sorry for him now. I always thought the man a little sneak—now I am sorely afraid he is an arrant rogue."

If there were qualities in which Mr. Katzen was deficient, impudent courage could not be reckoned amongst them. Such a charge as he had been called upon to meet might have daunted many a man, but New Andalusia's Consul was not daunted. With-

out further delay than that necessitated by changing his linen and getting something to eat, he repaired to Mitre Court, airing himself in the sight of all men, and walking through the City streets as though such places as Houses of Detention and the Police Courts had no existence. To Mr. Rothsattel, who had, indeed, only shown at the office after hearing the Lord Mayor's decision, he did not vouchsafe any remark save on the fineness of the weather, and passed straight into his office as though nothing special had occurred since last he entered it.

"I have had a great many persons here to see you, sir," said Mr. Rothsattel. "Most of them left messages that they would call again to-morrow; but Mr. Brisco and Mrs. Jeffley said they would return about four."

"Very good," said Mr. Katzen. "Delighted to see Mrs. Jeffley and Mr. Brisco at any time."

While they were speaking Mr. Brisco entered. He was paler even than usual, but otherwise showed no sign of discomposure.

"What am I to tell my friend," he asked, "about this business?"

"Just what you like," answered Mr. Katzen, with a large liberality.

"After what has occurred he will wish to know whether there is any shadow of truth in the statements advanced by Mr. Bernberg."

"I dare say-no doubt."

"Where would it be best for him to apply for information?"

"He had best write to New Andalusia."

"New Andalusia is a long way off."

Mr. Katzen shrugged his shoulders.

"If he likes not to write to New Andalusia he can go to the devil."

"That is further still."

"Is it? I know not. All I know is I cannot be troubled about the matter. I have my own business to attend to."

"I believe, Mr. Katzen, that what Mr. Bernberg says is quite true—that you have appropriated the whole of this loan."

"You may believe what you like. To me

it signifies not."

"If you suppose for a moment that you will be allowed to keep the money, that people will sit down and quietly allow themselves to be fleeced, you are greatly mistaken."

"People may do what they can. Roth-sattel, open the door for Mr. Brisco. He is going."

"Yes, Mr. Katzen, I am—to take the best

advice in London on the matter."

"That will cost much. Good-day, Mr. Brisco. Did I not hear Mrs. Jeffley's voice, Rothsattel? Show her in. Now, my dear friend, what can I do for you?"

"Oh! Mr. Katzen, say all this is not true. I feel quite distracted. I cannot say a word to anybody, and they have all been talking so at our house."

"When did they not talk at your house?"

"I should not care for the talk if I knew it was not true; but they have got up dreadful things about you. Still, whatever you have done, and whatever happens, you will see me righted, won't you?"

"Of course you will be as right as all the rest."

"All I ask is my money back; I do not care about the profits—you can keep them; only give me the hundreds my husband trusted me with into my hand now, and I will bless you on my bended knees."

"My most dear Mrs. Jeffley, if I would let you go on your bended knees, what good could it do me? Make yourself easy about the money; it is quite safe; it could not be safer."

"But I want it to be safe with me. I never closed my eyes all last night. I am sure they must be a sight to see, swelled up with crying and want of sleep. If anything was to go wrong with that money, I never could look Jack in the face again."

"Why not? You can do no wrong, to his thinking. He believes in you as much as you believe in yourself."

"That is just it. I never ought to have parted from the money without his knowledge."

"You did it all for good."

"I did; but if loss comes, it will be all for bad. Oh, Mr. Katzen! if you have deceived other people do not deceive me; after all the years I have known you and tried to help you, don't be wicked enough to cheat me."

"'Cheat' is a very nasty word," said Mr. Katzen, with an assumption of anger.

"It won't hurt you if you are acting fair.

Just give me back my own, that's all I ask."

- "I know; but you cannot suppose I am going to make myself answerable for the New Andalusian Loan; that would be a pretty thing."
- "If you have used the money, as they say you have, you ought to return it."
- "I have no money to return. You must go to New Andalusia for it."
- "But I know nothing about New Andalusia. It was you I trusted, not any outlandish country beyond the sea."
- "It was to New Andalusia you looked for your profit."
- "I have told you I do not want any profit, only my own back again."
 - "I fear you will have to wait a little."
- "No, Mr. Katzen; I am not going to wait."
 - "What will you do, then?"
- "Have my money by fair means or foul. I should not like to hurt you, but I must have my money. I am sure if anybody had told me you ever could have treated me so badly, I would not have believed them."

"Well, Mrs. Jeffley, as you won't listen to reason, the best advice I can give you is to go to some respectable lawyer. He, perhaps, will tell you how to get your money back from New Andalusia. I confess I cannot."

"And this is all you have to say to me?"

"I am afraid I can add nothing more."

"Then what I have to say is, you are a bad, bad man, and I wish I had never seen you. I do—I do—I do!" gasped Mrs. Jeffley, bursting into tears.

"I am so sorry to have made you cry; but you had better go home and cry. If anyone came in it would look bad for you to be seen crying here. All the world will be coming by-and-by about its money. You are one of many. Rest content; the money is quite safe, far safer than it would be with you. Now—now—now, please don't make a scene; I cannot let you make a scene. An office is not a fit place for a scene. The person to manage this matter is your husband. Ladies ought not to appear in business; no, not by no means."

"You are a dishonest wretch, and I—I thought you would not have wronged me for the world."

"Here, Rothsattel! you take Mrs. Jeffley to the 'bus. She is a good deal upset, and it hurts me to see her. Perhaps she would prefer a cab. Farewell, dear friend; I hope you will be better soon. Trust to me. I shall go at once to New Andalusia and set matters straight. It is indeed a shame that the folly of Bernberg should have made so many people anxious."

"It is a shame that any man should be such a rogue as you are."

But this last arrow failed to reach its mark. Mr. Katzen had already closed his door and locked it, leaving the admirable Rothsattel to get rid of poor Mrs. Jeffley as best he could.

What a commotion there was that day among all who had invested anything in New Andalusia; what a rushing there was to Mitre Court; what seeking for comfort and finding none; what consulting of friends and solicitors; what clinging to straws; what hoping against hope! These things are

written in the annals of every swindle, small and great, that the world has known.

It was late when, tired out, Mr. Brisco returned to the old house. He was like a man distraught. He could not rest, and he could not eat—neither could he sit still! He had passed the limit of his mental strength, and could dissimulate no longer; he paced the hall till the sound of his unsteady steps drove Frank almost mad. Up and down, up and down, with the hopeless monotony of a chained animal, walked the ruined man.

"Have you lost anything by Mr. Katzen, father?" Frank ventured, when at last the sight of his misery grew insupportable.

"All—all!" was the answer; "the savings of years—the hope and purpose of my life—gone!"

After hours, his son persuaded him to lie down.

"I will sit beside you," he said, as he supported the tottering and trembling man upstairs; and so through the darkness and through the dawn he kept his vigil, as Abigail had so often kept hers.

Midnight had long sounded from all the

City clocks before Mr. Brisco dropped off into an uneasy sleep. He tossed from side to side, and murmured broken sentences, moaning and mourning over his lost life, till his son's heart was wrung with anguish and pity.

Towards morning he opened his eyes and looked wildly around.

- "Where is she?" he asked.
- "Do you mean my mother?" asked Frank, thinking the old sorrow was coming uppermost once more.

But Mr. Brisco shook his head.

- " Abigail?"
- "Yes. Where is she?"
- "She has left us," said Frank softly. "You wished her to go; she is abroad with her aunt."
 - "Ah! I had forgotten. I remember now." And Mr. Brisco said no more.



CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF THE LOAN.

MAN cannot lead the life Mr. Brisco has done without damaging his constitution beyond repair," said the doctor who had been called in, to Mr. Brisco's son. "I do not tell you that he will die. With good nursing and constant care there is little danger of that for many a year; but he will never be the man he was again. This shock has been too much for him. He must give up business, and be idle for the rest of his days. I wish we had Miss Weir here now. She managed him better than anybody else ever can. She had the knack of letting him alone. But she is abroad, I understand."

"Yes," answered Frank; "and in any

case I could not ask her to come to us. She is with a rich relative."

"I heard something about that. Then you do not even correspond?"

" No."

"Ah well," said the doctor ambiguously, "I should like to hear of luck coming to her in any way. She was a thorough good girl."

Meanwhile, though Frank did not know it, the "thorough good girl" had returned to England.

"I must get back, my dear; I am tired of it all," declared Mrs. Moreton.

And back accordingly they came, somewhat within the six months. It was a way Mrs. Moreton had of getting tired of most things; but so far she had not wearied of Abigail.

"She is vastly improved—do not you think so?" she said to Mr. Fulmer, whom she had bidden to a quiet dinner one Saturday shortly after her return.

"I fail to see much change; she is very thin, if that is what you mean."

"She has fined down," remarked Mrs. Moreton.

"She did not want fining," retorted Mr. Fulmer.

"My dear George, in some matters you really are a little dense. Whether you have noticed it or not, Abigail has acquired quite an air of society."

"I am very glad to hear it, if you are pleased; but what will an air of society do for her?"

"Many things; amongst others, enable her to make a good marriage."

"For the future then, I suppose, she is to appear in that society of which she has acquired the air, as your heiress, not as your companion?"

"How absurd you are!"

"Am I? well, perhaps. Still, except as your heiress, I don't exactly see how she is to make a great match."

"Do you suppose no one would marry the girl for the sake of her bright eyes?"

"Many persons, I should say; but not persons you would look upon with favour. As my good mother wisely affirms, 'In our rank we contract alliances; we do not rush into love-matches.'"

"Why should not Abigail contract an alliance?"

Mr. Fulmer raised his eyebrows.

"In the first place, I do not think she would care for an 'alliance,' if she could contract one; and in the second, the other high powers might find a few things to cavil about."

"Perhaps you will instance," said Mrs. Moreton, getting very red.

"Thank you, I would much rather not. I have suggested—— Oh, here is Miss Weir. I was just remarking to your aunt that you had grown thin."

"My aunt was always saying we missed the English beef and mutton."

"Very true; and stout," added Mr. Fulmer.

"Fie! fie!" reproved Mrs. Moreton, who was, in her way, even more particularly refined than Lady Adela.

They got very well through dinner, however, though nothing so common or unclean as stout graced the board and gratified Mr. Fulmer's palate.

"In the absence of Guinness," he said, "I can make myself quite happy with Clicquot. Nothing like a contented mind, Miss Abigail."

- "Nothing," agreed Abigail, laughing.
- "But if she is contented or happy, or in the most ordinary good health, I'm a Dutchman," thought Mr. Fulmer. "God help the girl, the life is killing her!"
- "You don't eat enough to keep a sparrow alive," he said, when the servants were gone and Abigail was toying with her fruit.
- "A young lady ought to be able to live where a sparrow would starve," answered Abigail roguishly.
- "Beyond all things, child, avoid flippancy," observed Mrs. Moreton, with evident annoyance.
- "I notice that is a rock upon which many young ladies founder nowadays;" and Mr. Fulmer poured himself out some claret.
- "We shall be very glad to see you upstairs, George," said Mrs. Moreton, as she rose from table; "but I do not wish to monopolize you," which was a stock expression of Mrs. Moreton's, and meant that if Mr. Fulmer had taken her at her word, she would have felt deeply affronted.

Mrs. Moreton was a "difficult woman," a much more difficult woman even than Lady

Adela. She liked a man to belong to a club, but she never liked him to go to one. There was a fiction prevalent in Lowndes Square that Mr. Fulmer, though in a general way always hungering and thirsting for the very latest club gossip, so delighted in the improving conversation which prevailed in Mrs. Moreton's house that he could not tear himself away; whereas there never existed a man who so loved a quiet fireside, even though no word was spoken, as Frank's chief.

When he repaired to the drawing-room he found Abigail in sole possession. Mrs. Moreton had gone to write a note, and Abigail sat on a low chair at work.

Large and confident, Mr. Fulmer came into the room. Abigail looked round and smiled.

- "What do you call this?" he said, taking up one end of her work.
 - "Guipure lace," she answered.
 - "You are always busy at something."
 - "I like to be always busy."

There ensued a pause, which Mr. Fulmer broke by saying:

"As I had a hand in bringing you and your aunt together, I am delighted to hear she is satisfied with you. May I inquire whether you are equally satisfied with her?"

Again Abigail glanced up, and laughed as she answered:

"Fairly well, as the Scotch say, Mr. Fulmer. She has given me fifty pounds, which seems a fortune, and wishes me to stop on at the same salary. Do you think I could make myself worth so much money?"

"No doubt, no doubt; but are you happy, Miss Abigail?"

"Is any one happy?" she asked.

"I hope so. I am happy when Mrs. Moreton is kind to me; sometimes she is very severe. And so you are going to remain here. I am glad of that. You know your aunt is a very rich woman."

"That is a matter which cannot concern me."

"Why not? If you play your cards well, you may get all her money—wake up some fine morning and find yourself an heiress."

"I fancy anyone who began to serve Mrs. Moreton for her money would fare

much as Jacob did with Laban—after seven hard years get Leah instead of Rachel."

Mr. Fulmer leaned back in his chair and laughed heartily; the conceit tickled him.

"That is the first bright remark I have heard you make in this house," he said. "I am so glad. I feared the intense propriety of Lowndes Square had altogether damped your spirits. Mrs. Moreton," he went on, as that lady re-entered the room, "your niece has been amusing me greatly, and I like to be amused. She has also a very pretty skill with her needle; now do you not think this would look well as a trimming on waist-coats?"

And he displayed Abigail's lace-work on his own ample person.

"Don't be ridiculous," said his hostess, in high good temper.

"Well, I will try not," he answered, wheeling his chair a little way from Abigail, as though to set a space between himself and temptation.

"It was all the fault of this frivolous young person," he remarked; "she demoralizes me."

And with great gravity he began to discourse concerning the merits of a new preacher Lady Adela had "discovered," till at last there came up Figgins, coffee, and a lull, during which Mr. Fulmer amused himself with thinking about Mrs. Moreton's hopes, and the blow he meant to deal them. He had lived long enough among clever matrons to know Abigail's aunt imagined he entertained an affection for that young lady, and, the difference in their years not-withstanding, wished him to avow it.

"She is likely as not to live to a hundred," he thought meditatively, looking at the possessor of wealth he had hoped she would, as a mere matter of justice, share with her niece, "and she won't give her a penny unless the girl marries to her mind. Miss Abby won't have any need for money if she goes on as she is doing for another six months. Never saw such a change in anyone before. Selfish old hag, Mrs. Moreton! I will put a spoke in her wheel."

"By-the-bye, Miss Weir," he began, putting down his cup and turning to Abigail,

"have you heard anything lately about your friend Mr. Katzen?"

"No," said Abigail, with a pretty "don't-care" gesture.

"That is a pity," returned Mr. Fulmer, "for he really is possessed of a most pleasant humour and quite a fund of original resource. He has lately amazed all who had the happiness of knowing him."

"How?" asked Mrs. Moreton.

"He is Consul for a place called New Andalusia—you know that, Miss Weir?"

"I ought," answered Abigail; "I heard him talk enough about it."

"Just so. Well, he floated a loan for New Andalusia; one of the many loans, Mrs. Moreton, in which I advised you not to invest. He found much trouble in getting money, more trouble than is usually experienced in gulling John Bull; so much trouble, indeed, that, having got the money, he decided to keep it."

"Keep it for whom?" inquired Mrs. Moreton.

"For himself—for Karl Katzen; and he did, till he had spent most of it in mad specu-

lations. There have been bigger swindles aforetime in the City, but never one which produced such a sensation. Three hundred thousand pounds the little beggar raked in and wasted. He does not exactly know himself how it has all gone; people say a clerk in his employment relieved him of the care of a portion of it; but however that may be, the fact remains, Miss Abigail, that three hundred thousand pounds have been subscribed as a sort of testimonial to your clever friend. The confidence of the British public is really touching. In exchange for New Andalusian bonds the British public parted with its hard-earned money; and now the bonds turn out to be only worth the price of old paper. There has been a great hullabaloo over the matter, but nothing came of it, or ever will come of it."

"And where has the wretched man gone?" asked Mrs. Moreton.

"Gone—nowhere. I met him to-day in Cornhill, looking well and happy. Having had his fling with that New Andalusian trifle, he is looking out for some other sheep to shear."

"But why is he not punished?" demanded Mrs. Moreton.

"Because he can't be," was the answer. "A comrade of his had him up at the Mansion House, but the case was dismissed. They have raised a fund among the shareholders to take the matter into Chancery, but I suspect a very knowing lawyer called Slim will be the only person to really benefit by the proceedings. New Andalusia won't prosecute, because that would be recognising the Consul as her agent. No, the man will escape scot-free; a very clever game for your little friend to play—eh, Miss Weir?"

"I never thought him clever, but I see I was wrong," answered Abigail.

"Wrong, most decidedly; and the beauty of the whole thing is he has lost nothing—not even his character, because he had none to lose. What amazes me is that anyone trusted him. Fancy, now, Mr. Brisco being let in for some thousands—"

"Mr. Brisco!" repeated the girl.

"Mr. Brisco, who denied himself food in order to save money. He has lost every penny, and his health besides. He is lying in a most precarious condition. Did you not know? Has no one written to you?"

Abigail shook her head, and Mr. Fulmer proceeded, pretending not to see the signs Mrs. Moreton was making:

"I cannot imagine what they would do in that house if it were not for Mrs. Jeffley. By the way, there is one person satisfied with the result of the New Andalusian loan —Mr. Jeffley."

"He never liked Mr. Katzen," Abigail forced herself to say.

"It is not that," answered Mr. Fulmer, laughing. "Some time back a friend left him fifteen hundred pounds, which he entrusted to his wife; his wife entrusted the money to Mr. Katzen; Mr. Katzen kept it; and ever since Mrs. Jeffley, who, I hear, was something of a tartar, has been as meek as a lamb. Mr. Jeffley says he wouldn't have grudged losing twice fifteen hundred if he could only have had the pleasure of thrashing the Consul. He tells me he went to Mitre Court with the intention of taking the worth of his money out of the Consul's body; but he

looked such a little fellow, that Mr. Jeffley, who is a big man, came away again. Curious person, Jeffley!"

"You seem tired, Abigail. Had not you better go to bed, child?" interposed Mrs. Moreton at this point.

"Yes, she is pale," said Mr. Fulmer. "Good-night, Miss Weir; do not dream of Mr. Katzen."

"I will never forgive you, George—never!" declared Mrs. Moreton, as Mr. Fulmer closed the door behind her niece. "Now, do not pretend to be surprised, for I know you did it on purpose. In five minutes you have undone all my work of the last six months. I was weaning her mind away from that dreadful old man and his disreputable son. I was fitting her for a different rank in life. I was training her into ladylike ideas and habits—"

"You were killing her," corrected Mr. Fulmer.

"Kill—nonsense! the girl is as well as any girl need wish to be. You have most cruelly, as I consider, revived all the memories I wished her to forget. I should

not be astonished if she even wished to go and see these people."

"I should think very little of her indeed if she did not."

"She must please herself. Should she go, I tell you plainly, she shall never return, and you will be the cause of the whole mischief; but it is of no more use reasoning with you than it is with your mother."

"Perhaps so," he said good-humouredly; but do not act hastily, Mrs. Moreton. Sleep upon the matter."

Whether Mrs. Moreton slept at all that night is open to question; one thing only is certain, she arose in the same mind, and was quite ready to declare war when Abigail requested permission to go into the City.

"Certainly not," declared Mrs. Moreton; "you shall come with me to church."

"I may go after church, then?" pleaded the girl.

"You will not go after church, or at any other time; I forbid you even thinking of such a thing as visiting Mr. Brisco."

"He is sick, and in trouble."

"What is that to you? If you intend

running after every old beggar who chooses to lose his money and fall ill, you will have enough to do."

"When I was sick and starved *he* did not turn me from *his* door."

"Let us have no argument about the matter; I have said you shall not go into the City. Let that suffice."

"But I entreat you to listen to me. I should be a monster of ingratitude if, now I know Mr. Brisco is ill, I could rest without going to see him."

"Once for all, you shall not go. I wonder even you should propose anything so outrageously improper!"

"It is not improper; and if it were, I should not care. What is unfitting in one rank is not unfitting in another."

"I will not endure impertinence from you," retorted Mrs. Moreton. "Take your own way if you choose; but remember, if once you leave this house, you leave it for ever. No one remains with me who disputes my commands."

"I am not ungrateful to you because I am faithful to Mr. Brisco," persisted Abigail.

"If ever you are sick or in sorrow send for me, and I will not fail you; but I will leave you now. I am not fit for the life you want me to lead. Could many waters wash away the memory of a past like mine? If I lived with you fifty years I should never feel as the young ladies of your world feel, nor think as the ladies, young and old, of your world think."

"Of course you will act as you think fit. I have no power to compel you to stay here."

"Ah! do not speak as if you were angry with me."

"I am angry. I treated you in all respects as if you were my own child. I intended you to marry well, and had you settled suitably, would have given you a handsome dowry; but as you prefer this old man and his son to me, there remains no common ground between us. As a matter of ordinary decency, I should have thought you might feel some reluctance to fling yourself at the head of a former lover who has shown he does not want you; but it would be unreasonable to expect modesty or decorum from your mother's child."

"It would," agreed Abigail bitterly; "it would indeed."

"So clearly understand that, if you are not ready to come with me to morning service, I shall conclude you mean us to part for ever."

Abigail did not immediately answer. Perhaps she was thinking where she should go when Mrs. Moreton's house was closed against her; but she did not remain silent for long. Rising, she said:

"Good-bye then, aunt. Thank you for your kindness. I am sorry to leave you in this way; more sorry still you should think me ungrateful."

"That will do," returned Mrs. Moreton; we can now forget each other. Your luggage shall be forwarded to any address you desire."

"Thank you," retorted Abigail, with much spirit; "but I brought almost as little into this house as I brought into the world, and I want nothing out of it. Forgive me," she added vehemently, "for speaking so rudely, but you seem to imagine I care only for ease and clothes and——"

"Set your mind at rest," interrupted Mrs.

Moreton grimly. "I know you care for nothing but your own way; your mother took her own way. She did not find it particularly pleasant or respectable, I fancy. No, do not come near me. I decline to shake hands with you. If there is one thing I hate and despise more than another it is hypocrisy."

The bells had long ceased ringing when Abigail entered the City; in every street and court and alley the blessed Sunday stillness she knew so well reigned supreme. She had left her aunt's house chafed and hurt; but as she drove from the West there came over her a sense of peace and freedom which seemed wonderful after the long subjection of will and wish to the bidding of another. The remembered silence laid a quiet hand on the troubles of her soul. The City seemed home to her who was now literally homeless.

She dismissed her cab in East Cheap, and walked slowly forward, thinking over the step she had taken—wondering whether Mr. Brisco would refuse to see her. The taunt Mrs. Moreton had thrown out stuck and rankled. Perhaps she was doing an unvol. III.

maidenly thing in going to the old house; but she had left it to serve Frank, and she was returning out of pity for his father.

In a few moments she was at Love Lane; going down the narrow street, passing St. Mary's and the familiar court with its redbrick houses, she did not meet a creature. The City might have been enchanted ground, so little sign of life was there within its limits. She looked up at the old house; nothing was changed, save that it wore a look of neglect it cut her somehow to see. She ran up the steps; the door stood ajar. Some one had gone out for a moment and would be back presently; but she did not wait for their coming. She pushed open the door and passed in. The marble pavement, the wide staircase, greeted her like friends; they seemed to say to each other, "Here is Abigail." The very echoes were familiar. Yes, this was her home—her own—the only home she had ever really known. Tears sprang into her eyes, but she brushed them away, and went upstairs to the room Mr. Brisco had always occupied as a bed-chamber. So far not a sound had broken the stillness;

the old house might have been tenanted by ghosts. A strange feeling of unreality began to oppress the girl. What if Mr. Brisco had gone away; what if strangers were in charge of the building? At the well-remembered door Abigail paused, and, after a moment of hesitation, knocked softly.

"Come in," said some one in a low, hushed voice; and then she entered.

On the bed lay Mr. Brisco, motionless and colourless. Illness had wrought somewhat the same change in his appearance that is usually produced alone by death. All cynicism, all hardness, all bitterness were wiped clean away; but with them had gone, likewise, the power and the strength which usually cling to a man's face, even when life is gone.

A woman who sat beside the bed rose. It was Mrs. Jeffley — anxious and somewhat pale, but Mrs. Jeffley still, buxom, nicely dressed, good and wholesome to look at.

"I did so hope you would come," she said, speaking in a whisper.

Abigail kissed her. At that moment her wrongs, if she had any, were forgotten, and

she remembered only the woman ever ready to help and to give.

For she had not expected to see Mrs. Jeffley there, and yet it seemed natural.

- "How is he?" she asked.
- "Very bad," was the answer.
- "Is it all true?" went on Abigail.

Mrs. Jeffley nodded.

- "And Frank?"
- "He bears up wonderful. Says he has got to keep his father and himself, and can do it. He keeps quite cheerful."

The words struck cold on Abigail's heart. No need for her, no place for her—she felt a stranger in the old house. She did not feel more a stranger on that first night, when she crept in like a dog out of the cold, and slunk like a dog away from sight. A moment before she had been about to remove her hat and jacket, but now she stood silent. They had done—they could do without her; there was no niche for Abigail. The necessary gulf separation creates yawned wide and clear before the girl's eyes. She felt as if she could not bridge it. She was not necessary in the house of which she had been the

moving spirit, she thought bitterly, when a slight movement of the sick man attracted her attention.

He was trying to raise his feeble hands, and his eyes, which still retained something of their former keenness, were turned in the direction of Abigail.

"See, he knows you!" exclaimed Mrs. Jeffley. "Come close to him; he wants you."

Mechanically the girl obeyed, doubtfully, remembering how they had parted. She drew near the sick man.

"I am Abigail," she said, dropping on her knees beside the bed. "May I stop?"

From the white lips there came some sound which Abigail, who had once understood Mr. Brisco's every gesture, could not comprehend.

Helplessly she turned to Mrs. Jeffley for an explanation.

"What is it, dear?" asked Jack's wife, bending over the sick man. It was strange to hear Mr. Brisco addressed as "dear," and more strange still to find him not resenting the liberty.

"He wants to know where you have been," said Mrs. Jeffley, raising her head.

"I have been in Italy," said Abigail, addressing Mr. Brisco.

There ensued another pause, during which Mr. Brisco was evidently ill at ease about something.

"He does not like seeing you in your hat," hazarded Mrs. Jeffley.

Abigail removed her hat, but still Mr. Brisco appeared dissatisfied.

He kept his eyes fixed on Abigail, and at last, with one feeble finger, contrived to touch her shoulder.

"I'm sure I have not a notion what is wrong with him now," said Mrs. Jeffley.

"It was given to me," explained Abigail, who understood he was objecting to the richness of her dress. "I will put on another."

Again he seemed uneasy.

"Poor fellow! See, he is asking you to give him your hand," translated Mrs. Jeffley.

Next moment Abigail was on her knees by the bedside, with the clay-cold fingers clasped in hers, with her face buried in the coverlet, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Why, who is this?" asked a voice behind her.

"Don't you know? It is Abigail!" exclaimed Mrs. Jeffley.

"Abigail! ABIGAIL!"

"Yes, Abigail." The girl had risen, and was addressing him in person. "Abigail come to stay. Abigail, who wants to—"

But here Abigail broke down completely, and fell sobbing on her lover's breast.





CONCLUSION.

Porters, carrying great nosegays, walked two and two up the broad aisle to deposit their benevolence on the altar, could St. Mary-at-Hill have been crammed fuller of flowers and company than on that fine autumn morning when Ralph Francis Brisco there took to wife, till death should them part, Abigail Weir.

The church was crowded; old friends and new were all there to see two young people made happy.

Not a grand company by any means, but quite grand enough for a pair who had many a year of hard work and struggle before them.

No guests were bidden, but guests came unbidden. Not one of the parishes round

about failed to furnish its contingent, and as the bride passed up the aisle a subdued chorus of "God bless her!" "God make them happy!" was perfectly audible. And there never was a happier bride. Her face was April weather: she could scarce smile for tears; she could not shed tears for joy.

Frank was very grave, but very proud. What man would not have been while Abigail was promising, with all her soul in her voice, to love, honour, and obey him?

Mr. Jeffley, who gave the bride away, declared he personally could not have felt livelier if he had been the bridegroom.

"If you're only as happy, my boy, as I am when you have been married as long, you wouldn't care to have a rent-roll of five thousand a year," he declared subsequently; while Mrs. Jeffley, in a perfectly new dress—over which Mrs. Mount kept her in a fever, not bringing it home "till just upon twelve the night before the wedding"—spent her time in nodding encouragement to Abigail and looking daggers at Mrs. Childs, with whom she had, weeks before, engaged in a battle-royal concerning the discovered iniquity of

leaving Sophia in charge of Mr. Brisco, "though what harm that innocent child could do him or anybody else passes my understanding," said the culprit.

Not to show any unchristian resentment—because, as she stated, "It always has been my endeavour to do a good turn, even to them as despitefully uses me" — Mrs. Childs had smiled and nodded in an affable manner to her old employer; but Mrs. Jeffley returned this advance in the sight of the whole congregation with so stony a glare, that Mrs. Childs retired discomfited, and was forced to seek solace in whispering to Sophia:

"Who's she, I'd like to know? Set her up, indeed!"

Variety was given to the solemnity of the proceedings by Sophia, who, dressed in her very best, with a huge white favour pinned under her chin, audibly read the marriage service through a little in advance of the clergyman. Sometimes she lost ground by reciting such unnecessary portions as "I publish the banns of marriage between M. and N.," as also the directions printed in

italics; but she always, by reason both of speed and steadiness, regained it, and was thus enabled generally to win by a head at some critical point. She scored immensely when the rector was saying, "Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband?" because he read very slowly and Sophia fast. Holding her Prayer Book well up to her eyes, a second before he had reached "as long as you both shall live," Sophia electrified the congregation with—

"The woman shall answer, 'I will."

The rector paused, and looked around. As he did so, from the body of the church there came:

"Then shall the minister say, 'Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?' Then shall they give their troth to each other in this fashion."

"Some lunatic is present," thought the rector, and went on calmly.

At last the service was finished; at last the bells pealed out.

"Not ring for her! my conscience," said one of the men, "I'd ring till my arms ached!"

The service was over—the register signed—

the bride congratulated—the happy pair back again in the old house.

There was no wedding-breakfast, but all who cared to see the gifts were gladly welcomed to wine and cake.

Some of the presents were very handsome, many only such things as are sent to bazaars.

Every member of Deedes' firm contributed something worthy of display. Mr. Fulmer gave publicly a clock, and privately a cheque for a hundred pounds. Lady Adela, in the joy of her heart, a knitted shawl. Mrs. Moreton sent nothing—not even a hope that the newly married pair might be miserable.

There were gifts which touched Abigail mightily, and which she arranged with great care. Little pincushions, little needle-books, little baskets filled with flowers for "dear, dear Miss Weir;" but, as was natural, the articles which had cost most money drew the largest share of attention.

"Don't talk to me," said Mrs. Childs, genial to the last, as, cheered with wine and satisfied with cake, she left the old house. "Ill or well, mad or sane, Mr. Brisco made

no mistake when he let his son marry Miss Weir. She'll have hundreds and hundreds of thousands one of these days, and they'll not let her touch a penny of her own fortune, was it ever so!"

THE END.





